UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Resilience in Emerging Adulthood:
Academic Success of Post-Secondary Students Raised in Foster Care

By

Tania Joy Jacobs ©

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Abstract

Foster children are less likely to pursue and complete post-secondary education than their peers not in care, and are at risk for many negative adult outcomes. Obtaining a post-secondary education can be seen as a marker of resilience in emerging adults (age 18-25) who grew up in care. In this qualitative study, four female foster care alumni were interviewed regarding the factors they believed contributed to their success as post-secondary students. The details of their foster care histories are presented as narratives, followed by a discussion of themes. The positive construction of the self and of the events in one's life is a key element of resilience. Resilience is also promoted by optimism, independence, a desire to prove to critics that success is possible, experiences that allow youth to feel that they have purpose/value, and carefully choosing one's social entourage. Implications for working with foster youth are discussed.

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Dedication

For all the adolescent girls who camped in New Moon teepee at
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for getting me thinking about resilience
and being my muse for this research topic.

❧

For the remarkable, resilient young people in the Edmonton Big Brothers Big Sisters
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❧

For Grace, Mariah, Amy, and Chloe.
Thank you for sharing your lives so openly.
Your stories are motivational and uplifting, and I am in awe of your accomplishments.
I wish you every happiness in your future endeavours.

❧

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I INTRODUCTION.. 1

Summary of Chapters.. 5

II A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.. 7

Resilience in At-Risk Youth.. 7

Factors Affecting Resilience in At-Risk Youth............ 8

Individual Factors and Processes.................... 10

Familial Factors and Processes...................... 14

Community-Based Factors and Processes.......... 15

School and Academic Resilience............................ 20

Emerging Adulthood.. 22

Resilience in Emerging Adulthood.......................... 29

Children Raised in Foster Care.................................... 31

Prevalence of Foster Care....................................... 31

Adversity Faced by Children in Care........................ 32

Outcomes for Youth in Care.................................. 34

Youth in Transition... 37

Resilience in Youth in Transition and Youth in Care...... 40

Implications of the Research Literature............................ 45

Summary.. 45

Focus and Significance of the Present Study............... 46

III METHODOLOGY.. 48

Process of the Inquiry.. 48

Selection Criteria and Participant Recruitment............ 48

Interview Process and Informed Consent.................. 50

Data Analysis and Interpretation............................. 51

Trustworthiness.. 52

Internal Validity... 53

Reliability.. 54

External Validity... 55

IV PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES.. 57

Mariah.. 57

Grace.. 61

Amy.. 65

Chloe.. 68

V RESULTS... 72

Construction of the Self.. 72

Early Negative Self-Constructions.......................... 72

Pieces That Don't Quite Fit.................................... 74

Positive Re-Constructions...................................... 79

Facilitating Factors... 80

My Personality Was an Important Part of My Success.... 80

The "I'll show you" attitude.............................. 81

Independence/self-sufficiency............................. 83

Conditional optimism... 84

Choosing One's Entourage.................................... 85

Mentorship... 89

Peer friendships.. 92

Decisions about birth family connections.......... 93

Finding One's Purpose/Value................................ 96

Educational Pathways to Post-Secondary........................... 98

Expectations for Educational Attainment................... 100

Barriers to Pursuing Post-Secondary......................... 101

Summary of Results.. 103

VI DISCUSSION.. 105

Factors Affecting Resilience.. 105

Construction of the Self.. 105

Individual Facilitating Factors.................................. 108

Interpersonal and External Facilitating Factors............ 109

Comparing Outcomes.. 112

Former Foster Youth... 112

Emerging Adults.. 115

Implications for Policy and Practice................................. 116

Evaluating the Research... 118

Limitations of the Research.................................. 119

Future Directions for Research.. 120

Conclusion.. 121

References.. 122

Appendices... 130

List of Appendices

Appendix	Description	Page
A	Recruitment Poster..	130
B	Letter to Participants..	131
C	Informed Consent Form....................................	132
D	Demographic Information Form.................................	134
E	Research Consultant Confidentiality Agreement..............	135
F	Semi-Structured Interview Schedule.............................	136

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The search for a "resiliency factor," is a quest of considerable interest to all those adults who work with at-risk youth. It is of great value to find out what contributes to some individuals being able to thrive despite adversity while others flounder abysmally, so that those who are struggling can be helped. This question has sparked the interest of researchers in a variety of areas, including nursing and health care (e.g., Aronowitz, 2005; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003), social work (e.g., Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Ungar, 2004), psychology (e.g., Everall, Altrows, & Paulson, 2006; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999), and education (e.g., Howard & Johnson, 20000; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, and D'Ambrosio, 2001). The current study seeks to add to this body of literature with the goal of helping to elucidate factors that promote resilient outcomes for alumni of the foster care system.

It is estimated that there were approximately 76,000 children in foster care in Canada in 2003, a number which is only increasing over time (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). Children in foster care are exposed to more than their share of life stressors from an early age. Many are exposed prenatally to drugs or alcohol (Courtney et al., 2001), which can result in a host of developmental challenges. Their primary caregivers often face multiple challenges, including addictions, mental health issues, domestic conflict or abuse, and involvement in criminal activity. As a result, they are unable to parent effectively, and children are neglected, subjected to various forms of abuse, or maltreated in some other way (Pecora et al., 2006). Consequently, by the time they are taken into protective custody by Child and Family Services, these children have already experienced considerable trauma. Unfortunately, the foster care system in

Canada is sufficiently overburdened that these children often face further challenges once in the system, including inappropriate placements, insufficient monitoring, multiple home and school transitions, and further incidences of abuse and neglect (Farris-Manning & Zandstra; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005).

It is not surprising therefore, that long-term involvement in the foster care system tends to be associated with poor outcomes. Children and adolescents in foster care are more likely to have trouble in school and to have more behavioural and emotional problems than their peers not in foster care (Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006). They are more likely to be involved in delinquent behaviour and with the criminal justice system, and to run away from home (Farruggia et al.; Pecora et al., 2006). As adult alumni of the foster care system, they are more likely to complete high school via General Equivalency Diploma (GED) than a regular high school diploma, and less likely to attend or complete any post-secondary education (Courtney et al., 2001). They are also more likely to experience homelessness, employment difficulties, relationship discord, violence, ongoing psychological issues, and continued dependence on social assistance and welfare (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, & Bernard, 2007; Farruggia et al.; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2006).

Resilience is generally understood as adapting well despite facing considerable adversity and challenge. One way to define resilience is as a "relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences" (Schofield & Beek, 2005, p.1284). Academic functioning is commonly used as an indicator of resilience and well-being for children (Olsson et al., 2003; Smokowski et al., 1999). Academic resilience is also associated with positive outcomes for children later in adolescence and early adulthood. One important marker of success and resilience for former foster youth therefore, is their participation in post-secondary education (Hines et al., 2005), as a significantly lower number of former foster youth pursue and complete post-secondary studies than their peers in the general population (Pecora et al., 2003). Furthermore, this suggests that they are working to secure themselves a more stable future in terms of employment, income, and a successful career in a field of interest.

Previous studies examining resilience in foster care alumni, current foster youth, and other populations of at-risk children and adolescents have found links between a variety of factors and the promotion of resilient outcomes, though definitions of resilient outcomes vary. There is no single resilience factor that is a magic "cure" for youth in challenging situations. Instead, research has found that factors tend to interact in a cumulative fashion; the more protective factors operating in the lives of an individual, the more likely the individual is to succeed. The more risk factors present, the more difficult and unlikely success will be (Olsson et al., 2003; Sameroff, 2006), and the more remarkable resilient outcomes are. Factors associated with resilient outcomes come from all levels of a child's ecological milieu. Individual factors such as temperament, personality, and intelligence interact with interpersonal factors such as parenting style, presence of mentors, and relationships with peers (Aronowitz, 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten & Shaffer, 2006; Smokoski et al., 1999). All of these factors further interact with systemic, macro-level forces including socioeconomic status (SES) and related issues such as discrimination and access to resources (Masten, Obradovic, & Burt, 2006; Olsson et al.), as well as social policy. Consequently, resilience is best understood and studied as a multidimensional construct.

In order to provide the developmental context of former foster youth who are pursuing post-secondary education, it is necessary to examine the literature on emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood comprises the period from 18 to 25 years of age, when individuals are engaged in the process of exploring their identity and deciding on the paths for their adult life in terms of career and relationships (Arnett, 2006). This period has recently been proposed as a separate developmental phase in Western countries due to widespread demographic changes from previous generations where the majority of 25-year-olds were already well settled into adult roles in employment, marriage, and parenthood. In most industrialized societies today, it takes young adults much longer to develop separate, individual identities away from parents and their family of origin (Tanner, 2006). This more gradual transition has been brought about in part by dramatic increases in post-secondary education participation rates (necessitated by employers demanding higher levels of qualifications), and economic conditions making it difficult for emerging adults to support themselves and study simultaneously. As a result, many emerging adults continue to rely on parents for some degree of financial support, which may include having parents pay for part of their education, their living expenses or both. Emerging adults tend to move frequently, change relationships frequently, and try out a variety of occupations before choosing a focus for their adult life. Because emerging adulthood is a time when individuals are making many important decisions about their future, Arnett argues that it may be a critical time for the expression of resilience.

For adolescents who grew up in foster care, navigating the transition to adulthood may present additional challenges. Due to legislation determining when they will cease to be supported by the government, foster youth may be emancipated from care as early as 16 years of age (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). They do not have parents to turn to if they require additional financial or emotional support as they begin independent living, and for many of them this means that pursuing post-secondary education is out of the question. However, some former foster children do attend post-secondary school during emerging adulthood, and determining the factors that they believe to be instrumental to their success may provide clues as to how individuals involved in the lives of foster children can promote this resilient outcome for more youth in care.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to interview emerging adults in post-secondary school who grew up in foster care and to learn about the factors that they recognize to be significant contributors to their current success. From this knowledge, it is hoped that concrete suggestions will emerge for those working with foster children who wish to encourage them to pursue post-secondary studies and cultivate other resilient outcomes for this at-risk population. Specifically, this study seeks to address the research questions: what was the experience of foster care alumni while they were in care, and what factors do they spontaneously describe as being critical to their successful pursuit of post-secondary education in the present? For the purpose of this study, "post-secondary education" includes attending a technical school, college, or university in any program. This may include a degree or diploma program, as well as upgrading courses to complete a high school diploma with the intention of continuing on with further post-secondary studies.

Summary of Chapters

This thesis begins with a review of several bodies of literature. First, the concept of resilience is defined and its history in the scholarly literature briefly explored. Next, factors found to be affecting resilience in at-risk youth in previous studies are discussed. The phenomenon of emerging adulthood is then defined and discussed in order to give the reader a framework for understanding the developmental context of the participants in this study. Finally, a section on the prevalence of foster care broadly outlines the current state of Child and Family Services in Canada, some of the issues faced by these youth, and the implications for outcomes for youth in care and foster care alumni. The literature review concludes with a section describing the focus and significance of the current study.

Chapter III describes the methodology used in the current study, from participant recruitment to the analysis of interview data. In addition, strategies for addressing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study are discussed.

Chapter IV presents brief narratives of the participants' histories in foster care from their perspective. These stories allow the reader to develop a sense of the context and the identity of each participant so that they can better comprehend the themes that emerge when participant interviews are analyzed in greater detail.

Chapter V presents the resulting themes from the interviews with participants. Themes and interpretations are illustrated with numerous quotations taken from interview transcripts. A description of the educational history of each participant, their expectations for educational attainment and the barriers to post-secondary they perceive youth in care face today concludes this results section.

A discussion of the results is presented in Chapter VI. This discussion highlights links between the current results and the literature reviewed in Chapter II; similarities and differences are underlined and explored. Some implications for policy and practice are outlined, with concrete suggestions for intervention by those who work with youth in the foster care system. Finally, suggestions for future research directions are made prior to a brief conclusion summarizing the contributions of this study to the literature.

CHAPTER II: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review will pull together several bodies of research in order to properly frame the present study examining resilience in emerging adults who grew up in foster care and are now pursuing post-secondary education. First, the review will define resilience and briefly summarize the history of this concept in the literature, followed by a more in-depth exploration of various factors that have been found to influence resilience in at-risk youth. Next, this review will describe the concept of emerging adulthood and its usefulness for understanding the lives of the participants in this study. Finally, this review will summarize current statistics about children in foster care in Canada, some of the issues they face, and literature findings about outcomes for children who grow up in care. Examples of resilience will be highlighted in each of these areas.

Resilience in At-Risk Youth

Resilience has been defined as both a stable personality trait that allows individuals to thrive in the face of difficulty, and as a positive outcome exhibited by some individuals who have suffered hardship (Everall et al., 2006). Masten (1994) defines resilience concisely as "successful adaptation despite risk and adversity" (Barton, 2005, p.135). This understanding of the concept dominates the resilience literature, and will be used to define resilience for the purpose of this study. Current research shows that resilience is a dynamic, evolving, and multidimensional process that includes both individual and contextual protective factors, as well as interactions between the two (Everall et al.). Barton argues that ignoring the ecological milieu in which resiliency occurs results in an incomplete understanding of the resilience process. This conclusion is the result of a gradual theoretical evolution toward the current scholarly focus on resilience. Throughout the 20th century, researchers examined a variety of social problems faced by youth with the idea that finding solutions to these problems would change adult outcomes at a societal level. The focus of this line of research paralleled a medical paradigm; the goal being to find a treatment or a cure, with "little or no attention to what was healthy and strong in the life of an individual" (Vanderpol, 2002, p.302). Over time, researchers realized that managing symptoms alone, without attention to the ecological conditions that gave rise to the problem in the first place, is an ineffective "band-aid" solution. Instead, it was recognized that constellations of risk and protective factors combine in a cumulative fashion to produce particular outcomes. As a result, strengths-based approaches and community prevention initiatives gained widespread acceptance. Researchers also became increasingly interested in exceptional individuals who "appeared to be thriving despite having characteristics and being in situations that would normally be associated with pathological outcomes" (Barton, p.137), individuals we would now describe as resilient. Importantly, some scholars have qualified that resilience does not require that children exhibit "universally effective coping skills" or perfection in any behavioural, emotional, or social domain, only that they exhibit "relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences" (Schofield & Beek, 2005, p.1284). Understanding what is different about resilient youth and/or their environment can inform recommendations for better policy and practice.

Factors Influencing Resilience in At-Risk Youth

Many studies examining risk and protective factors for a given negative outcome posit that these factors can be organized into categories based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which views a child as developing within a nested structure of environmental influences (Berk & Levin, 2003). According to Bronfenbrenner, individual biological and psychological characteristics of the child shape and are shaped by the child's "microsystem," which includes the child's family, school, and community. The microsystem is in turn bidirectionally affected by the "macrosystem" of the larger society in which it exists. Factors in the macrosystem that may indirectly affect a child's development include social norms and values, as well as the laws and policies of the country or region in which the child lives (Berk & Levin). Not surprisingly then, researchers have found factors at each of these levels that influence the resilience process. In addition, individual characteristics of the child, including biological factors such as general health and early brain development, basic temperament, as well as traits affected by interactions of nature and nurture such as intelligence also interact with the ecological milieu of the child (Schofield & Beek, 2005). For this reason, most resilience scholars endorse a biopsychosocial perspective that emphasizes the ways in which risk and protective factors interact to promote or hinder the development of resilience.

Furthermore, it is now widely understood that no single factor within the child or their environment produces an outcome, but that outcomes are the result of complex probabilistic interactions of multiple factors (Masten & Shaffer, 2006; Rutter, 2006; Sameroff, 2006). Sameroff cites several studies that all imply this same conclusion: "Whatever the set of variables used, the universal finding was that the more ecological risk factors, the worse the outcome for the child" (p.60). Furthermore, constellations of risk factors may be associated with one another, such that examining risk factors in isolation is unlikely to be of particular benefit to understanding the complex reality of children's lives (Sameroff). In addition, with more risk factors, opportunities for interactions among risk factors also increase (Olsson et al., 2003). Fortunately, the same can be said for protective factors.

It is also worth noting that factors may not be universally risk or benefit inducing. Luthar, Sawyer, and Brown (2006) caution against using the terms *risk/vulnerability* and *protective factors* without careful definition, as these may create unwarranted assumptions when results are interpreted. For example, low socioeconomic status (SES) is a risk factor for many negative outcomes. However, it does not follow that high SES – or affluence – is a protective factor (Luthar et al.). Sameroff (2006) also argues that the term *protective factor* may be misleading, but for different reasons. He posits that some bipolar factors, i.e., factors that are risk-producing at one end of the continuum, and benefit-promoting at the other, do not affect all populations of youth in a universal way. Instead, he specifies that the term *protective* factor should be reserved for variables that facilitate positive outcomes in high-risk populations, whereas the term *promotive* factor should be used to designate those factors that support positive development and outcomes regardless of the general risk status of the population. Schofield and Beek (2005) agree that "each protective factor will only be protective in relation to specific risks" (p.1284). Finally, Luthar et al. argue that an understanding of processes, as opposed to static factors, is also of critical importance. Sameroff concurs that outcomes are generally the result of an interaction of factors, providing further support that an examination of any factor in isolation is unlikely to yield a complete picture of resilience. The following sections will explore some of the relevant literature regarding various factors and processes that have been found to affect resilience in at-risk youth at three levels: individual, familial, and community-based (Olsson et al., 2003).

Individual Factors and Processes

Rutter (2006) argues that any examination of the concept of resilience must begin by acknowledging the "huge individual variation in people's responses to the same experiences" (p.26), and that at least some of this variation must be due to fundamental differences between individuals. These may include the ways that people process challenging experiences; what meaning they give them in the overall scheme of their concept of self, others, and the world around them; as well as what action they take in response to adversity. Rutter posits that these characteristics affect the sensitivity of the individual to risk experiences. In a review of the literature on resilience in adolescents ages 12-18, Olsson et al. (2003) list many individual-level resources that protect adolescents from negative outcomes. These include temperamental and neurobiological factors; sociability of the child (responsiveness to others, pro-social attitudes, and attachment relationships); intelligence, which relates to academic achievement as well as planning and decision-making skills; communication skills; and personal attributes such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, the ability to withstand negative emotions, flexibility, tenacity, sense of humour, and an internal locus of control. In a study of African-American inner-city youth, adolescents also identified individual factors that contributed to positive outcomes in their lives, including the ability to learn from others' mistakes, perseverance, determination, and an optimistic outlook for the future (Smokowski et al., 1999). For another group of at-risk youth in foster care as a result of being abused as children, five factors were identified with resilience: "the youths' ability not to blame themselves; considering the situation to be normal; distancing themselves from the situation; seeing themselves as having value; and believing in their futures" (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, & Bernard, 2007, p.980).

In an early review of the youth resilience literature, Masten and Coatsworth (1998) state that "the two most widely reported predictors of resilience appear to be relationships with caring prosocial adults and good intellectual functioning" (p.212). The importance of mentoring relationships will be discussed in more detail in later sections. Interestingly, IQ has been found to be a moderator in the pathway linking adversity to antisocial behaviour rather than having a direct effect on positive outcomes. Masten and Coatsworth postulate that the problem-solving abilities measured by intelligence testing may allow youth to find novel solutions to dilemmas, protect themselves better, and/or self-regulate emotions and behaviour more appropriately. Higher intelligence is also likely to attract the attention, help, and mentorship of teachers in the school setting (Masten & Coatsworth). Together with good behaviour, this predicts better academic outcomes, which tend to be an indicator of successful adaptation for youth

Vanderpol (2002) agrees that resilient children have character traits and coping mechanisms that allow them to deal with stressful situations more effectively. An easygoing temperament may help a child to avoid abuse and develop positive mentoring relationships with caregivers and other adults. Strong cognitive abilities and the related traits of being realistic and being able to self-reflect allow youth in challenging situations to prioritize things in their environment that must be dealt with in order to ensure survival (Vanderpol). In addition, resilient individuals tend to be optimistic, self-confident, and have a good sense of humour. They also have strong ego boundaries that prevent them from becoming enmeshed in the troubles of others, and are aware and tolerant of their own negative emotions. For example, Vanderpol studied Jewish Holocaust survivors, and found that some of them had not been paralyzed by the typical "survivor's guilt" but instead had channelled this negative energy into helping others following their escape. Furthermore, Vanderpol argues that resilient individuals may avoid feelings of victimization by maintaining an attitude that they can beat the odds and prove that their obstacles are surmountable. Finally, many individuals who successfully survive unbelievable levels of adversity, such as the Holocaust, use the defence mechanism of denial to their advantage. Many of them create what Vanderpol calls a "safe intrapsychic space, in which they live, talk to themselves, and feel invulnerable" (p.304). Although externally, these individuals may appear to be passive – a coping style that may allow them to "fly under the radar" and avoid harm – internally they are often actively resisting or imagining themselves fighting back, which allows them to maintain a positive sense of themselves as strong, self-reliant, and in control.

Vanderpol (2002) believes that these resilient characteristics are inborn and without them, developing resilience is difficult or impossible. However, many of these traits can also be strengthened or instilled by external influences. Optimism, a good sense of humour, and the denial of a victim attitude can all be modelled to youth by mentors. Positive role models who take an interest in youth may boost their self-confidence by allowing them to feel valued. In addition, if youth are given opportunities to experience success in a variety of settings, such as academics and/or extra-curricular activities, or more broadly within their social world of peers, family, and community (Rutter, 2006), they are likely to develop confidence and an internal sense of themselves as competent, which may lead to internal resistance and more active coping in an "upward spiral"/ positive feedback loop fashion. Some researchers also posit that successfully coping with stressful events has a "steeling" effect, allowing these individuals to be better prepared to face future occurrences of stress and challenge (Rutter). On the other hand, Olsson et al. (2003) qualify that "there is nothing about exposure to adversity that necessarily toughens one up" (p.7), and instead posit that the "dose" and "timing" and contextual factors of stressful experiences all interact to produce "steeling" or "scarring" within the individual. Regardless, Vanderpol's assertion that resilient characteristics are strictly innate and that resilience can not be promoted later in life seems fundamentally flawed. However, it is very likely true that a combination of innate, individual, personality characteristics interact with a host of environmental factors to produce particular outcomes for at-risk youth.

Familial Factors and Processes

Family is an integral component of child development outcomes, so it is not surprising that various factors within and related to the family of a child or adolescent can affect how that young person copes with adversity (Masten & Shaffer, 2006). In fact, families themselves, or factors associated with them, may be the source of the adversity faced by the child. Masten and Shaffer argue that families can affect child development in positive or negative ways, and in direct or indirect ways. Positive direct effects can be described as promotive and viewed as a resource or asset that the child has on his/her side. These may also help to compensate for other external risk factors that the child is experiencing. Negative direct effects are risk factors for the child. Indirect effects may occur when the family moderates or mediates the effects of other factors. For example, parental income is a feature of the family that affects other ecological variables in the child's life, such as the neighbourhood where he/she lives, the school he/she attends, and the opportunities available to him/her. Each of these factors, in turn, has some influence on the overall developmental outcome for that child. Parental income is therefore a family factor that is a mediator in developmental outcomes. Family factors, such as parenting quality, may also moderate the effects of variables such as social class (Masten & Shaffer). Finally, interactions among the child, the family, and the environment can also combine in more complex, transactional ways to produce particular outcomes.

Masten and Shaffer (2006) then review the literature regarding some of the effects of specific family factors on child development. Effective parenting is strongly associated with positive outcomes regardless of the child's environment. Good parents teach their children the rules of society and protect them from harm. Secure attachment relationships with primary caregivers allow children to learn to regulate their own behaviour and affect, which is a critical element of positive developmental outcomes. Finally, as mentioned above, the family of a child also acts as the "provider, broker or purveyor of resources and opportunities" (Masten & Shaffer, p.12). Olsson et al.'s (2003) review of the literature on resilience in adolescents adds that warm, encouraging, non-blaming parenting style, along with general cohesion and care within the family unit are key protective factors for adolescents. Despite the focus on the peer group at this life stage, parents and family remain a critical source of social support for teens (Olsson et al.).

On the other hand, families can also be a source of risk or harm to children. Incompetent parents may inadvertently neglect their children or expose them to a variety of negative environmental dangers and influences "due to their circumstances, choices, or behaviours" (Masten & Shaffer, 2006, p.13). Unfortunately, parents may also cause direct damage to children in cases of abuse, maltreatment, or harsh parenting. These occurrences are consistently related to poor child outcomes, as are exposing children to interpersonal conflict and/or domestic violence (Masten & Shaffer).

Community-Based Factors and Processes

Mentorship.

Mentorship has been identified as an important factor in developing resilience. Along with intelligence, "relationships with caring prosocial adults" (Masten &

Coatsworth, 1998, p.212) were cited as one of the two most widely reported predictors of resilience in an early review of the youth resilience literature. A significant relationship with a caring, responsible, and competent adult can provide support for dealing with risks and barriers in the larger social environment as well as encouragement to overcome these obstacles (Smokowski et al., 1999). Mentoring relationships help children overcome risks associated with impoverished childhood environments and trauma (Masten & Shaffer, 2006), as well as poor parental marriages (Rutter, 2006). Role models show teens how to make good decisions and solve problems, exemplify some of the possibilities that adolescents can imagine for their own future, set limits on behaviour to keep adolescents safe, and make adolescents feel valued (Aronowitz, 2005). At-risk adolescents describe having a significant adult who supports and motivates them as a critical determinant of successful outcomes. Mentors believe in them and help them to counter stereotypes of adolescents as “troublesome and incompetent” (Aronowitz, p. 205), reaffirming adolescents’ sense of self-worth and raising the adolescents’ expectations for themselves and their future. Aronowitz therefore posits that the overall mechanism of resilience in at-risk youth can be encapsulated by a social process of “envisioning the future” (p. 202) that occurs in the relationship between at-risk adolescents and positive adult role models.

Todis et al. (2001) examined resilience in formerly incarcerated adolescents as well as adolescents who were involved in illegal activities early in their teen years but avoided incarceration. These latter respondents cited active family involvement and mentorship from other adults as key factors that helped them to change their delinquent behaviour, as well as associating with non-delinquent peers, choosing not to do drugs, and successfully returning to school and work. Once involved in the correctional system, respondents identified the structured environment of the facilities and the resulting abstinence from drugs, opportunities for mastery experiences in jobs that were assigned to them, and specific programs that helped them to improve their problem solving and interpersonal skills as positive influences. Many respondents were also able to establish meaningful connections with a caring adult in the correctional facility, and took time to reflect on their goals for the future (Todis et al.), reinforcing Aronowitz' findings described above.

A mentoring relationship may occur with a parent, a caregiver, a relative, a teacher (Smokowski et al., 1999), a neighbour (Rodgers & Rose, 2002), or any other adult in the adolescent's life. Contrary to previous theories and popular opinion that adolescents want little interaction with adults and seek independence, Ungar (2004) found that teenagers describe their relationships with parents/caregivers as essential to their mental well-being. Specifically, at-risk adolescents look to adults to reaffirm their conceptions of themselves as worthy, competent, and powerful, in a process Ungar calls "identity co-construction" (p. 32).

Peer support and general social support.

Another type of social support that is important for youth is that of peers. This type of support takes on increasing importance as children move into adolescence and adolescents transition toward young adulthood. Peer relationship quality is associated with adolescent self-esteem and general feelings of satisfaction with life (Pepin & Banyard, 2006). In a study of resilient African American adolescents at an inner-city school in Chicago, adolescents interestingly commented that it was difficult to find peers who could be trusted to be true and supportive friends (Smokowski et al., 1999). Peers therefore, are yet another variable that can be either protective/promotive of resilience, or can be a risk factor for negative outcomes. For example, affiliation with a deviant peer group is a critical factor in the onset and development of antisocial behaviour in childhood and adolescence (Gardner, Dishion, & Connell, 2008). Having antisocial friends tends to maintain high levels of delinquent behaviour in children showing these tendencies early on, and can also cause negative behaviour to emerge in adolescence. Interestingly, this relationship seems to be moderated by adolescents' self-control, demonstrating again that processes from each level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory interact to affect outcomes. In this case the individual capacity for self-regulation, including the ability to avoid deviant activities, control impulses, foresee consequences, and filter out negative discussions/ suggestions, can offset the risk of having a negative peer group (Gardner et al.).

On the other hand, social support can promote resilience. In a study of first year college students, Pepin and Banyard (2006) found that social support played an integral role in mediating positive outcomes for older adolescents who were abused as children. Using a measure of Eriksonian developmental conflict resolution (e.g., trust vs. mistrust, identity vs. identity diffusion, intimacy vs. isolation etc.) as an indicator of success, Pepin and Banyard examined outcomes for students who had experienced childhood physical and/or sexual abuse and/or neglect. As predicted, maltreatment was negatively correlated with overall developmental achievement, as well as specifically with trust and intimacy subscales, suggesting that adolescents who have been abused have particular challenges with these developmental tasks. Maltreatment was also negatively related to perceived social support. On the other hand, levels of perceived support from friends and family were positively related to developmental outcomes, which is also consistent with literature findings that abuse survivors have better outcomes when they have adequate social support systems. Further analyses revealed that perceived social support mediated the relationship between childhood abuse experiences and developmental outcomes, i.e. social support accounted for a significant portion of the variance in achieving trust and later, intimacy (Pepin & Banyard). Interestingly, levels of received support did not show the same results. Therefore the perception that friends and family are there for adolescents if they need them seems to be of far greater importance than actual instrumental support given during this developmental phase. Although this study did not separate the effects of family support from that of peers, it did support the conclusion that all types of social support – from family, peers, and/or mentors – can be an important part of the resilience process in at-risk youth.

Context and the macrosystem.

In their review of the literature on resilience in adolescents, Olsson et al. (2003) note that there are two primary social environments that are available to promote resilience: the school environment and the broader social environment. This latter domain essentially matches Bronfenbrenner's concept of the macrosystem. One element of the macrosystem that impacts the well-being of children and people in general is socioeconomic status (Masten, Obradovic, & Burt, 2006; Olsson et al., 2003), so it is not surprising that this factors into the resilience equation as well. SES is linked to other factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and exposure to systemic forces such as racism and other forms of discrimination, access to social services etc. Olsson et al. further note that "affirming, non-punitive social structures and supportive communities" may assist in the development of "social capital" (p.8) in young people, increasing their resistance to adversity.

Wadsworth, Raviv, Compas, and Connor-Smith (2005) note that living in poverty is a chronic stressor for both children and parents. It taxes emotional and social resources, and increases sensitivity to further stress and other risk factors. For example, chronic adversity, such as that produced by socio-economic disadvantage, increases the risk that children who are repeatedly hospitalized will experience emotional difficulties (Rutter, 2006). In a study of adolescent-parent dyads, economic hardship strongly predicted both emotional and behavioural problems in adolescents (Wadsworth et al.). In this context, these adolescents were also more vulnerable for additional problems in response to stressful life events. Finally, economic hardship causes stress and poor psychological outcomes for parents, which in turn further affects the well-being of adolescents. It is important to note that these relationships are transactional in nature; adolescents with behavioural problems create further stress and difficulty for parents who live in poverty, thereby increasing the likelihood of psychological symptoms for parents, which further increase the risk for adolescents in a cyclical, reinforcing fashion (Wadsworth et al.). These results support an extensive body of literature showing a "disproportionate accumulation of stressors among disadvantaged families" (p.293).

School and Academic Resilience

School can be both a protective environment for at-risk children and adolescents, and a setting in which resilience can be observed. Olsson et al. (2003) cite the school environment as an important ecological influence on adolescents, since they spend roughly a third of their waking hours in school. As a result, this becomes an important place in which to promote the development of both individual resources within young people, as well as to provide them with "a safe environment that can actively buffer against adversity" (p.7). School provides a context in which supportive peer interactions can occur and develop. In addition, children and teens may gain teachers as mentors and experience success – either in the classroom or out of it – that correlates to increasing self-esteem and resilient outcomes in general (Olsson et al.).

The development of competence in the area of academic achievement requires a combination of individual, social, family, and community resources (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Individual resources include cognitive abilities, motivation, and beliefs about school and about one's ability to succeed in school (Masten & Coatsworth). Martin and Marsh propose a "5-C model of academic resilience: confidence (self-efficacy), coordination (planning), control, composure (low anxiety), and commitment (persistence)" (p.277). All of these are individual traits, albeit ones that are likely transactionally related to influences from the child's broader social environment. Peer systems are also important, as are factors such as parenting style and parental involvement in the child's education (Masten & Coatsworth). Interestingly, parenting quality has been found to be linked both directly to academic achievement and indirectly to school success via socially-appropriate conduct, i.e. good parenting leads to good behaviour, which is related to doing well academically (Masten & Coatsworth). Adolescents from warm families with democratic yet firm parenting also do better in school and female college students are able to be more academically independent when they have strong emotional attachments to parents (Pepin & Banyard, 2006). For children in foster care, having a significant relationship with a positive adult role model, having peers who are academically-oriented and successful, and being involved in extra-curricular activities are all associated with better academic outcomes (Drapeau et al., 2007).

Academic performance is often used as a benchmark for successful adjustment and resilience in young people (Olsson et al., 2003; Smokowski et al., 1999). Academic resilience can be defined as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (Martin & Marsh, 2006, p.267). Martin and Marsh found that academic resilience predicted outcomes such as enjoyment of school and class participation, which in turn predicted further commitment to school, identification with the school community, and development of educational goals beyond the high school years. Academic resilience also leads to improved self-esteem, which in turn predicts "enhanced socioemotional growth, enhanced occupational outcomes, and even decreased likelihood of mortality" (Martin & Marsh, p.268). Furthermore, academic achievement tends to directly predict early success in the workplace in late adolescence (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), making academic success an even more important indicator of future well-being as adolescents begin to navigate the transition into adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood

In many of today's industrialized societies, expectations for individuals in their 20's have changed dramatically (Arnett, 2006). Instead of settling down into adult roles of marriage, parenthood, and life-long careers, it is now common for young people to have relatively unstable lives from the age of 18 to between 25 and 30, while they are exploring their identity and trying on future adult roles for fit. Consequently, Arnett argues that "the timing and meaning of coming of age – that is, reaching full adult status – is different… than it has ever been before" (p.4). Young people today have more freedom but less support as they navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the need for self-sufficiency at this time makes it a critical turning point.

Consequently, there has been a movement among scholars, led by Jeffrey Arnett, to reconceptualize this period of the life phase as a distinct entity known as emerging adulthood (EA). Bynner (2005) counters that the idea of extending the pre-adult life stage is not a novel one, noting that Stanley Hall, the 'father' of adolescent research, conceived of the adolescent period as ending around age 25 in his writings at the turn of the 20th century. However, recent demographic changes (Arnett) as well as "changing social and institutional structures in late modern western societies" (Bynner, p.368) appear to have produced an intellectual climate that is ripe for the acceptance of Arnett's theory.

In the latter half of the 20th century, dramatic changes occurred in the demographic characteristics of individuals aged 18-25. The median age of first marriage has increased by several years for both men and women (Arnett, 2006). On the other hand, there has also been an increase in the variance of the age of first marriage. Some individuals are still marrying in their early 20's, but it is no longer unusual for individuals to wait to marry until they are in their 30's either. Arnett notes a similar pattern for the age of individuals at first childbirth. In addition, while childbirth used to occur almost exclusively within the context of marriage, this is no longer the case. Finally, more individuals are participating in higher education than ever before. It is particularly noteworthy that the numbers of women graduating from universities and colleges have now exceeded men (Arnett). These demographic changes support the conclusion that this stage of life requires further definition and investigation.

German scholars emphasize systemic changes as the primary catalyst for differences in the life patterns of emerging adults, proclaiming that technological transformation and globalization have resulted in an increased need for qualifications in order to be successful in the job market (Bynner, 2005). The extended transition to adulthood can also be explained in terms of a changing need for the accumulation of "human capital" (p.369) through lifelong learning and job experience as opposed to basic education. This idea can be further expanded to include psychological attributes, such as adaptability, and social roles, such as membership in workplaces and other organizations, into a type of "identity capital" (p.370) that emerging adults have considerable agency in shaping and developing.

Arnett (2006) outlines five features that characterize the developmental period of emerging adulthood. First, EA is a time of identity exploration, particularly with respect to relationships and career. Second, it is remarkably unstable period as emerging adults try out different jobs, romantic partners, and/or education paths, all of which may also result in residential changes. Third, EA is the most self-focused stage of life. Emerging adults tend to be less egocentric than adolescents, but they are more autonomous in making decisions about their own lives while having relatively few commitments and obligations. This can be a time of glorious freedom, but it is also a purposeful time when emerging adults are focused on learning to stand alone and developing a "weltanschauung," (Tanner, 2006, p.41), or life philosophy for their adult selves. Fourth, EA is characterized by feelings of being "in-between;" being neither an adolescent nor yet fully an adult. Feeling that one has reached adulthood, research shows, can take a long time (Arnett). Finally, emerging adulthood is a stage of tremendous possibility. Even emerging adults from challenging backgrounds whose futures may not look promising believe they will be able to accomplish all of their personal goals at this time. They have more freedom to escape negative circumstances, and they are optimistic that they can change their futures. Interestingly, emerging adults with lower socioeconomic status are even more likely than their high-SES counterparts to believe their lives will be better than their parents' (Arnett). Emerging adults have more control over significant choices in their life, and are essentially working to shape their futures. Consequently, Arnett argues that "emerging adulthood represents a great opportunity, even arguably a critical period, for the expression of resilience" (p.14).

Tanner (2006) proposes a developmental task of recentering as the process underlying the life phase of emerging adulthood, defining this as follows: "Recentering constitutes a shift in power, agency, responsibility, and dependence between emerging adults and their social contexts" (p.27). She describes how this occurs across three stages: adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young adulthood, and emphasizes its relational nature. In adolescence, individuals remain embedded within their families of origin, and play more of an "actor" role in their lives than a "director" role (Tanner). At the age of 18, at least in the United States and Canada, individuals are granted social and legal responsibilities for their behaviours as autonomous adults. Consequently, the expectations for self-regulation of behaviour and self-sufficiency increase. Tanner argues that EA is characterized by "involvement in systems of education, occupation, and intimate relations that are exploratory and temporary" (p.29) in nature. Emerging adults begin a tricky renegotiation of their relationship with their parents as they strive to make decisions based on their own beliefs and values while often remaining partly, if not completely, dependent on their parents for financial support. Interestingly, most emerging adults experience increasingly positive relationships with their parents at this time, particularly compared to the "storm and stress" that characterizes the adolescent years for some individuals (Bynner, 2005). Over time, emerging adults gain necessary education, skills, and experience to become economically self-sufficient, and the boundaries between child and parent become clearer. At this point, the individual moves into the phase of young adulthood, which is marked by entry into long-lasting, if not permanent commitments to adult roles in career, relationship, and for most, parenthood (Tanner). Young adults are now creating families of their own.

Tanner (2006) nevertheless acknowledges that although the trend for the average emerging adult is one of increasing independence, trajectories of individual emerging adults are highly variable and often involve repeated increases and decreases of independence. For example, the emerging adult who is in college/university may support him/herself financially during the summer months while working full-time, but require some economic assistance from parents during the school year. Emerging adults may live on their own during the school year, but reside with parents during the summer months, or may move home following a change in employment or relationship status. This has earned them the nickname "boomerang kids" in some literary circles, and complicates the developmental progression of life for parents also as they experience an "empty nest" followed by one or more periods of "cluttered nest" (Mitchell & Gee, 1996, p.442). Emerging adults often also move in and out of romantic relationships as they learn more about what they want in a life partner. These multiple transitions and changes in amounts of self-sufficiency often last for several years.

In comparing European literature with Arnett's American findings, Bynner (2005) concludes that the phenomenon of emerging adulthood, while present also in Europe, may be strongly related to SES. The speed and duration of the transition to adulthood is affected by structural factors such as social class, gender, and ethnicity, as well as by institutional factors dictating how the transition from school to work takes place. Bynner examined members of three British birth cohorts born in 1946, 1958, and 1970. Not surprisingly, the level of qualifications and participation in post-secondary education increased dramatically from the first to the third cohort. Also, the discrepancy between men and women for educational attainment and employment earnings, though still present, decreased dramatically. Perhaps most interestingly however, was a finding that the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged members of society was widening. Characteristics of EA were only dominant in the former group, while "traditional accelerated routes to adult life were still as common as ever among the rest" (p.377). This leaves the reader to interpret that emerging adulthood, characterized by delayed parenting and marital commitment, and extended post-secondary education and occupational exploration, is a luxury of the rich. Bynner argues that Arnett's theory "fails to recognize adequately that the huge diversity of individual experience is constrained by location in the social structure" (p.378).

Tanner (2006) bridges this gap by acknowledging that "not all emerging adulthoods are created equal." (p.34) Tanner further explains that the way that the task of recentering is approached by an individual emerging adult is highly dependent on his/her previous experiences in society, including the internal working models of self and self-in-relation to others. These are the product of many contextual factors, including attachment style, parenting, and socioeconomic status. Tanner acknowledges that Arnett's theory is based primarily on research with college students, and therefore questions whether the characteristics of EA still apply to the "forgotten half" (p.42) of young people who do not continue their education beyond high school.

Undergraduate and graduate studies certainly promote characteristics of emerging adulthood, including exploration of possible careers and the delay of adult role commitments such as marriage and parenthood. In fact, the college setting may provide just the right combination of support and challenge to allow emerging adults to immerse themselves gradually into the waters of independence (Tanner, 2006). Interestingly, attending college is associated with higher levels of identity and ego development. Together with the delay of adult roles, these factors predict better adult outcomes, which may function as Bynner (2005) suspects, to further widen the gap between those who can afford to attend post-secondary education, and those who can not. However, Arnett argues that the age period of 18-25 includes developmental features shared by individuals who attend post-secondary education and those who do not (Tanner). For example, research comparing the occupational stability for young men who entered the workforce before completing high school, following the completion of high school, and not until they had entered or completed college found that while all men aged 18-25 had multiple job transitions, the instability was most pronounced for men who had the lowest levels of education (Tanner). In another study examining emerging adults' changes in perceptions of self-mastery over time, researchers found that gains in self-mastery were greatest for emerging adults who were working full time or attending school full time, compared to part-time students or individuals who were employed part-time or unemployed (Tanner). These results suggest that attending post-secondary education is not a prerequisite for experiencing features of EA such as identity exploration and instability.

Furthermore, differences between youth who attend college and those who do not are evident long before emerging adulthood. Family income in the first five years of life is predictive of educational attainment (Tanner, 2006). Tanner argues that differences in starting points before emerging adulthood combined with variable experiences during EA interact to increase the variability of individual trajectories during this part of the life span, but they do not negate the experience of an emerging adulthood altogether. Bynner

(2005) posits that a blanket categorization of individuals as belonging to a particular developmental stage is not useful, and prefers to use the concepts of "trajectories" or "pathways" which leave room to accommodate the role of factors such as individual agency, as well as access to personal, financial, social, and cultural resources. Bynner argues that these more fluid pathways also acknowledge that each outcome is affected by all previous outcomes. However, Arnett and Tanner do not presuppose the usefulness of these ideas, concluding instead that like all other developmental stages, EA includes considerable diversity among individuals, but individual trajectories share enough features to maintain the usefulness of describing and understanding emerging adulthood as a distinct phase of the life span.

Resilience in Emerging Adulthood

Masten, Obradovic, and Burt (2006) examine resilience as it applies to the transition into adult roles and responsibilities during emerging adulthood. Masten et al. argue that successfully navigating EA does not make an individual resilient unless they have been exposed to considerable adversity prior to and/or during this stage of development. Masten et al. define resilience in terms of "adaptive functioning across multiple domains" (p.176) and argue that these domains must be relevant to the developmental stage of EA. Adaptive functioning, these authors argue, does not need to be exemplary, but should entail demonstrable success within normal ranges or better. In a longitudinal study of approximately 200 children, Masten et al. examined outcomes in terms of academic achievement, social competence, and appropriate behaviour. In emerging and young adulthood follow up periods, the domains of work and romantic relationships were added. These authors focused their attention on three groups of individuals: those who were competent (who were functioning well and had low levels of adversity), those who were resilient (who were functioning well and had high levels of adversity) and those who were maladaptive (who were not functioning well and had high levels of adversity). Interestingly, the combination of maladaptive functioning and low levels of adversity was extremely rare (1% of sample).

Masten et al. (2006) found that emerging adults in the resilient group shared many characteristics with those in the competent group. Factors such as intelligence, positive family environments, and strong coping skills allowed individuals to thrive regardless of the presence or absence of adversity. Maladaptive individuals, on the other hand, seemed to be lacking many protective resources, such as quality parenting and intellectual skills, on top of their extensive histories of stress and challenge (Masten et al.). At the next follow-up period 10 years later, study participants were young adults around the age of 30. Masten et al. predicted and found considerable continuity between how emerging adults were doing in the domains of social relationships, academic achievement, and conduct, and positive outcomes 10 years later. It should be noted that success in these domains was predictive of ongoing success throughout childhood and adolescence as well. This is not surprising; children who do well tend to continue to do well. Interestingly, emerging adults' status in work and relationships in their late teens/early twenties had little unique predictive validity of competence in these domains or general positive outcomes ten years later. This is in agreement with Arnett's EA theory that emerging adults' involvement in these domains is usually exploratory and transitory in nature until they reach full adulthood (Masten et al.).

Masten et al. (2006) took a particular interest in the "late bloomers" in this study; young adults who had shifted from being in the maladaptive group in EA to being in the resilient group 10 years later. These individuals, though somewhat rare, had more of what Masten et al. call "EA adaptive resources" than their counterparts who remained in the maladaptive group. These resources included achievement motivation/future orientation, behavioural and emotional autonomy, support from adults other than parents, and solid coping skills for dealing with stress. This follows from previous research demonstrating that low SES adolescents who have higher levels of "planful competence" (Masten et al., p.179) – including realistic goal-setting abilities, a sense of personal agency, and self-control – were more successful in adulthood. Opportunities and life-changing events can also act as turning points for emerging adults who may be exhibiting maladaptive functioning. There is research evidence to support the contributions of marriage, military service, post-secondary education, and religious affiliation in promoting change during EA to allow high-risk adolescents to turn their lives around by the time they reach young adulthood. However, not all at-risk youth take advantage of available "second chances"; therefore there is clearly an interaction effect between personal characteristics such as the EA resources mentioned above and available opportunities (Masten et al.).

Children Raised in Foster Care

Prevalence of Foster Care

As of January 2008, the Government of Alberta reported that there were about 9,000 children in government care. Of these, 6,500 are in permanent care, and the rest are in temporary care. 59% of these children are Aboriginal (Government of Alberta, January 2008). Nationally in Canada, it was estimated that approximately 76,000 children were under the protection of Child and Family Services in 2003 (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). Aboriginal children are overrepresented among children in care throughout the country; Farris-Manning and Zandstra reported 30-40% nationally, with higher rates in the Western Provinces, which is consistent with the Alberta statistics presented above. However, a more detailed picture of children in care across Canada is hindered by the fact that child and family services is under provincial/territorial authority. Differences in legislation, policies, standards, and definitions make it difficult to compare between jurisdictions, or to gather relevant national data (Farris-Manning & Zandstra). For example, each province or territory has legislation defining what child maltreatment is, what makes a child "in need of protection," and even who is a "child." Farris-Manning and Zandstra note that these inconsistencies put Canada in danger of violating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified by Canada in 1991. The UNCRC defines a child as a person under the age of 18; however, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland/ Labrador, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories all "use 16 as the upper limit for a child in need of protection" (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, p.11).

Adversity Faced by Children in Care

Regardless of definitional issues affecting the statistics of children in care, some trends are reliably known to have an impact on children in care across Canada. First, the number of children needing protection and coming into government care is increasing over time, while the resources available to address their needs have decreased. There is a shortage of available foster homes and children are spending longer periods of time in care (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). As a result, children are sometimes placed in homes that are not a good match for them, or placed inappropriately in residential group-care settings. Both of these solutions are associated with negative outcomes. Poorly matched or overloaded foster homes increase the likelihood that placements will break down, resulting in less stability for the child. This, in turn, is associated with the development or exacerbation of attachment disorders, other emotional and behavioural problems, and unfavourable long-term outcomes in general. Poor racial and cultural matching of placements also puts children at risk for discrimination. Moreover, restrictive group care settings are associated with inferior self-concept and academic achievement in youth, among other negative consequences (Farris-Manning & Zandstra).

Second, children coming into care have higher needs than ever before. Farris-Manning and Zandstra (2003) cite research showing that 30-40% of children coming into care in the 1970-80's had emotional and behavioural problems, and this figure had risen to 50-80% by the mid-1990's. Psychological issues may be further aggravated by having to wait for long-term and/or treatment placements due to the shortage of positions available. Furthermore, foster care services are often ill-equipped to deal with children who have disabilities and/or developmental delays, or who may need additional emotional supports, such as gay and lesbian foster youth. In 1999, it was estimated that as many as 50% of children in care in Alberta had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), which is associated with learning disabilities and significant behavioural challenges. Children with disabilities are also overrepresented among children in care; in 2003, the Canadian Association of Community Living estimated that 60% of children in care had some form of disability (Farris-Manning & Zandstra).

Finally, social services agencies are increasingly trying to "do more with less." Due to the increasing numbers of children coming into care, and the increasing severity of cases, social workers have larger caseloads and are consequently at-risk for personal burnout, resulting in high rates of attrition and turnover. Furthermore, their ability to deliver high-quality, effective services is compromised by having insufficient time available to develop meaningful relationships with clients (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). This can result in foster caregivers feeling devalued as members of a child's professional team and having insufficient support to maintain quality placements, which is likely to result in poor retention of foster families that are currently in very high demand. Oversized caseloads also impede the ability of social workers to involve children in their own treatment planning, which is not only related to positive outcomes, but also identified as a right of children by the UNCRC: "all children capable of forming their own views have the right to express these view freely. Their voice is to be heard and taken seriously on matters that concern them" (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, p.17).

Children in care come from tumultuous backgrounds hosting a constellation of risk factors, which may include prenatal exposure to alcohol and drugs and various forms of postnatal abuse, neglect, and/or maltreatment (Courtney et al., 2001; Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). Children are brought into care because their safety and well-being is at risk, and yet the system designed to protect them and care for them is over-burdened and inadequate. As a result, children in care often continue to face adversity throughout their stay in care when these systemic factors compound the effects of their traumatic histories.

Outcomes for Youth in Care

In a study of 141 youth aging out of foster care in Wisconsin (i.e. leaving foster care because they were no longer eligible for services due to reaching the age of majority), Courtney et al. (2001) were able to get a detailed picture of the experiences of these foster youth that led to them being placed in care, some of their experiences while in care, perceptions of preparedness for leaving care, and outcomes 12-18 months after being emancipated from care. First, Courtney et al. examined the reasons these youth were placed ~~in~~ out-of-home care. Most of the sample had experienced at least one form of child maltreatment and cited this as the primary reason they were removed from their family of origin. This is typical of foster care populations (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, and Wyatt, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006). In the Courtney et al. sample, neglect was the most common form of maltreatment (66% of sample), followed closely by physical abuse (57%). Sexual abuse was less common (31%) but experienced by a higher proportion of female participants. Outcome studies for former foster youth also consistently report that primary caregivers in the youths' family of origin had multiple issues that contributed to their inability to parent effectively, including drug and/or alcohol abuse, mental illness, involvement in domestic violence, and/or incarceration (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006) Interestingly, 90% of the sample in the Courtney et al. study felt that their placement in out-of-home care had been necessary and that no services could have prevented this occurrence. Despite their negative histories, many foster youth maintain relationships with at least one birth parent, siblings, and/or grandparents throughout their time in care (Courtney et al.).

Unfortunately, many youth experience further abuse once in their foster care placements (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006). Despite this, it is not uncommon for foster youth to feel "lucky" to have been placed in foster care (Courtney et al., 2001), "grateful to have a roof over their head" (Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt, 2005, p.387), and that their foster parents and/or child welfare workers saved their lives (Pecora et al., 2006). On the other hand, youth running away from a foster care placement is not uncommon, and many youth run away multiple times (Courtney & Heuring; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2006). Some sources of emotional distress in foster youth include loneliness, feelings of stigma about being in foster care and consequently hiding their foster care status from others, feelings of having "no roots," and feelings of loss regarding their biological family (Courtney et al., 2001; Hines et al.).

Instability also characterizes the experiences of many foster youth (Hines et al., 2005). In Pecora et al.'s (2006) study, foster care alumni had spent an average of six years in care and had an average of 6.5 placements, with almost one third of the sample having more than eight placements. Concomitantly, almost one third of the sample had changed schools 10 or more times throughout their childhood. Research has shown that children in foster care are more likely to have behavioural problems, academic difficulties, and to be in trouble with the law (Farruggia et al., 2006; Pecora et al., 2006). They are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol as adolescents and young adults, to experience relationship violence and discord, and are at risk for poorer psychological outcomes than their peers who have not experienced foster care (Drapeau et al., 2007; Farruggia et al., 2006). Pecora et al. (2003) found that 11% of former foster youth had some kind of chronic illness and over half had been diagnosed with a psychological disorder during their childhood. One of the most common diagnoses for foster youth is ADHD (Pecora et al., 2006).

Furthermore, a limited body of research suggests that the prognosis for adult outcomes for youth who have grown up in foster care is not good. In the Casey National Alumni Study, 1,609 former foster youth were interviewed about their experiences in foster care with Casey Family Programs between 1966 and 1998. These alumni completed high school at rates similar to those of the general U.S. population, but a disproportionate number did so via GED as opposed to regular high school diplomas (Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2006). Young adults emerging from the foster care system are also less likely to attend and graduate from post-secondary institutions than other young adults. Before leaving care, the youth in Courtney et al.'s study had high educational aspirations, most planned to complete high school (90%) and many (79%)

hoped to pursue college degrees. Most youth believed at this time that their goals were attainable. Twelve to eighteen months later however, only 55% of respondents had completed high school and 9% entered college. In the Casey study, 40% of the alumni pursued some post-secondary education but less than half of them completed a degree or certificate. The results are even more staggering for more advanced degrees: only 1 in 50 completed a Bachelor's degree or higher (Pecora et al., 2006). This completion rate was substantially lower than that of the general population. In a study of 100 youth who left foster care in 1999/2000, Daining and DePanfilis (2007) found that 82% had completed high school, and over a third of these were enrolled or completing some advanced education; results that are much closer to national statistics for young adults. However, 25-50% of former foster youth experience homelessness at some point during adulthood and 40% remain dependent on welfare (Farruggia et al., 2006). Former foster youth also have significantly higher rates of psychological distress than other youth their age (Courtney et al.; Pecora et al., 2006).

Youth in Transition

As a result of the recent interest in emerging adulthood as a distinct phase of the life span, combined with a concern for the well-being of former foster youth, "youth in transition" (YIT) from foster care to independent living have generated considerable research interest. For many foster youth, challenging conditions persist as they make the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, YIT may not have the same kind of familial support to fall back on if things don't work out financially, academically, or in a relationship. This issue is partly due to legislation that regulates the age at which funding for foster youth is ceased, which in Canada is between the age of 16 and 21, depending on the provincial jurisdiction and circumstances of the youth (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). Given the examination of the EA literature above, it is not surprising that this sudden removal of support at the end of adolescence causes particular problems for foster youth emancipating from the foster care system. YIT may experience additional challenges without the "ordinary scaffolding provided by typical families to help young people with the transition to adulthood" (Masten et al., 2006, p.178). The plight of youth in transition was described succinctly by one former foster youth in a report entitled "To be on our own with no direction from home," (p.11) leading Farris-Manning and Zandstra to note that there is a movement among service providers to increase the maximal age of child and family services support to 24 years. Stein (2005) argues that the emotional, financial, and practical support provided to emerging adults by parents is not available to youth leaving care. Combined with an increased likelihood of homelessness and young parenthood, youth leaving care are at serious risk for a lifetime of living in poverty (Stein). Youth in transition need additional financial support and preparation for independent living (Farris-Manning & Zandstra).

In their study of youth aging out of the foster care system, Courtney et al. (2001) asked youth about their preparedness to be living independently. Prior to leaving care, most youth reported having some training in the areas of food preparation, money management, employment and educational planning, finding housing, transportation, hygiene and health care, using community resources, legal skills, and parenting. This training tended to come either from foster parents (39%), or specialized independent living training programs (32%). However, when asked about their preparedness for independent living 12-18 months later, after they were actually out on their own, the numbers were much lower, suggesting that the training these youth received was not as concretely helpful as it had intended to be. One quarter to one third of participants reported feeling not at all or not very well prepared for independent living in most skill areas, with 29% of these youth reporting that overall, they had been unprepared to live on their own (Courtney et al., 2001). Results from the Casey study reinforce this conclusion. One alumnus reported:

> The foster care program could have prepared me a lot better, made sure I had what I needed: bed, clothes, dishes. Made sure I knew how to handle my finances, made sure I had the right skills to get a job, and given me a better chance to continue my education (Pecora et al., 2006, p.19).

Other challenges facing foster youth in adolescence and emerging adulthood include involvement in delinquent behaviour and financial and employment difficulties. In the Courtney et al. (2001) study, almost one-fifth of participants had been arrested at least once in the 12-18 months since their discharge from the foster care system, and 27% of males and 10% of females had been in jail. In addition, 12% of youth reported having been homeless at least once since their discharge, and 22% reported having lived in four or more places. In the Casey study, 22% reported being homeless for at least one night during the year following their emancipation from care and 19% reported being homeless for the first time and for a week or more (Pecora et al., 2006). Employment rates in the Courtney et al. study were lower at the follow-up period than they had been prior to youth leaving care; down from 81% employed to only 61%. Caucasian and male youth were earning significantly more than female or African-American youth. One third of the sample reported having received some form of public assistance since leaving care. In the Casey study, the employment rate for alumni ages 25 to 34 was slightly lower than the national average, however the median individual incomes earned by alumni were much lower than those in the general population (by almost 50%) for both males and females, and female Casey alumni were earning significantly less than their male counterparts. Twelve percent of the sample was receiving public assistance at the time of their interview with researchers (Pecora et al., 2006). In a preliminary phase of the Casey study that included fewer alumni, one third were found to be living at or below the poverty line, which was three times the national average (Pecora et al., 2003). In the Daining and DePanfilis study (2007) 52% of alumni were employed, 59% were parents, and 28% had experienced homelessness since leaving care. It should be noted that the sample of emerging adults in this study was 91% African American and 66% female. In the United States, minority children are overrepresented in the foster care system in much the same way that Aboriginal children are in Canada. Furthermore, many former foster youth report having outstanding mental health needs that they are no longer able to afford services to address after they are emancipated from care, and no health insurance (Courtney et al.; Pecora et al, 2003).

Courtney et al. (2001) argue that these statistics show that a significant proportion of former foster youth have major difficulties navigating the transition to adulthood. In their study, 37% of participants had experienced one or more unwanted outcomes in the 12-18 months since leaving care, including serious physical victimization, sexual assault, rape, incarceration, or homelessness, with males reporting more problems than females. Clearly, this indicates that former foster youth need additional support to be able to navigate emerging adulthood more smoothly.

Resilience in Youth in Transition and Youth in Care

Despite considerable adversity and vulnerability to negative outcomes, there are still many instances of resiliency for youth in foster care and youth in transition to independent living. Daining and DePanfilis (2007) found that resilient outcomes for former foster youth were associated with being female and being older when they left the foster care system. In addition, lower levels of perceived life stress, higher levels of social support from friends and family, as well as higher levels of spiritual involvement and faith were all associated with more positive outcomes. In the Casey study, factors predictive of adult success in former foster youth included being male; completing high school before leaving care; being involved in extra-curricular activities, clubs, and organizations while in care; having life skills preparation and scholarships for college or job training; not being homeless within a year of leaving care; and minimal academic difficulties and alcohol and drug use (Pecora et al., 2006). The gender differences seem to depend on the sample, but other factors are not unlike those discussed in previous sections about resilience, including social support, opportunities for mastery experiences, and academic success.

Schofield and Beek (2005) performed a longitudinal study of children in long-term foster care in England to examine factors associated with resilient outcomes, operationalized as whether or not children were making process in developing a secure base within their foster family, functioning well socially with peers, and feeling a sense of permanence and family membership in their foster families. Children who were making "good progress" (p.1288) at the three year follow up seemed to be able to use their foster parents as a secure base for positive change and development in a variety of areas. This was associated with having a good fit between caregiver and child, having caregivers who were sensitive and able to empathize with the child's thoughts and feelings, and who provided opportunities for children to make age-appropriate decisions, think independently, and be assertive. Schofield and Beek (2005) also argue that good foster parents provided aVygotskian "zone of proximal development;" i.e., scaffolding activities so that a child could achieve better results socially or behaviourally than they would be able to do alone. Finally, a critical difference between children making good progress and those making "uncertain progress" or those in the "downward spiral" group was the level of involvement of social workers. Regular social work support seemed to be a critical determinant of resilient outcomes (Schofield & Beek). Without this support, foster families were often left feeling isolated and helpless to assist the children in their care. Schofield and Beek conclude by reiterating that that risk and protective factors combine and accumulate in particular ways to contribute to change in a positive or negative direction for the child, but that it is important not to focus on the many risk factors present in the lives of children in foster care as it is also possible that single factors or events can affect developmental outcomes:

> To use Kahlil Gibran's image of childhood (Gibran, 1926), a brief but powerful gust of wind might shift an arrow's trajectory towards the rough ground, however skilled the archer or well constructed the arrow, but equally small changes in the direction of flight may avoid danger. This viewpoint leaves one feeling hopeful that "small but influential and catalytic changes" may be all that is required to promote resilience (Schofield & Beek, p.1298).

In a qualitative study of teenagers aged 14-17 who had been in care in Quebec City for an average of 7.3 years, Drapeau et al. (2007) examined turning points and processes that led to resilience. They found that adolescents identified three types of turning points or breaking points that led to more resilient pathways: one was a significant achievement or accomplishment of some kind (e.g., getting a job, doing well in an activity) that allowed them to realize that it was possible for them to succeed; another was establishing a trusting, positive mentoring relationship with an adult; and the last was a placement change that prompted personal reflection, which in turn led to the realization that they were at a dead end and needed to become agents of change in their own lives if things were ever going to improve (Drapeau et al.). These turning points then led to a "chain reaction" of other processes that interacted to reinforce positive changes. Placement changes also often served to remove youth from the negative influences of abusive parents and antisocial friends, gave them more structure, and helped them deal with drug and alcohol addictions in many cases. The teens felt the satisfaction of having overcome an obstacle, and consequently experienced an increase in perceived self-efficacy. Once these initial shifts were in place, a co-constructive process of resilience often emerged, with other people in the youths' lives (e.g., social workers) providing them with new opportunities to pursue interests, do volunteer work, and generally find additional meaning in their lives. Once teens seemed to be on the "right track" (Drapeau et al., p.990), there seemed to be positive ramifications in all areas of their lives, including family relationships with birth parents, peer relationships, school performance, and good behaviour. This aligns closely with Rutter's (2006) summary of "key resilience promoters" (p.41), which includes reducing the impact of adversity and preventing the occurrence of concomitant negative chain reactions while providing opportunities and experiences to allow youth to process positive aspects of their situation, experience success, increase self-esteem, and move forward in a "upward spiral" direction instead.

Hines et al. (2005) studied 14 former foster youth attending a 4-year university program using in-depth qualitative interviews as a pilot project for a larger study on former foster youth in post-secondary school. As noted previously, successful completion of post-secondary education is a relatively rare outcome for youth in transition that can be seen as resilient since getting a university degree is likely to contribute to higher levels of financial stability and better adult developmental outcomes in general. Participants in this study recalled feeling that they had been forced to "grow up quickly" (p.385), and that this made it particularly difficult to relate to peers. Interestingly, most of them had had little or no contact with their biological family during their time in care. They reported that the instability of their childhood both before and after their entry into foster care instilled in them a sense of concern regarding future housing and financial security. They viewed the pursuit of post-secondary education as being something they could do to secure a more stable future for themselves. In addition, respondents seemed to share a host of personality traits that tend to promote resilience, including easygoing yet independent and self-sufficient natures, optimism, resourcefulness, intelligence, assertiveness, and the ability to delay gratification (Hines et al.). They identified being able to accept help from mentors, teachers, friends, and parenting-figures as another key factor in their success. Furthermore, these students were goal-oriented and tenacious, and many of them wanted to prove to others that they could beat the odds and succeed despite expectations to the contrary. Finally, all of the participants in this study "saw school as a positive alternative to their troubled life" (Hines et al., p.389), and most of them had been placed in programs for gifted students and taken college preparation classes. In addition, these students had experienced relative stability during the high school years; most of them attending only one high school. They were able to meet the demands of relatively challenging high school curriculum, and reported that there were both internal and external expectations that they would pursue post-secondary studies (Merdinger et al., 2005). On the other hand, despite high levels of expectations and goals for their futures, these emerging adults nevertheless reported ongoing psychological and emotional challenges as a result of their traumatic childhoods.

Consequently, Hines et al. argue that defining resilience simply by the outcome of attending college/university may be misleading.

In the next phase of this study, Merdinger et al. (2005) surveyed 216 former foster youth attending four year university programs. This sample shared many characteristics with other foster care outcome studies. Participants spent an average of seven years in out-of-home care and had an average of 3.3 placements. Twenty-four percent of them had run away from their foster care placements and 23.1% had been homeless at some point. Thirty-nine percent had participated in an independent-living skills program while in foster care, and 40.5% of them felt they were somewhat prepared to live on their own, but 35.2% felt that they were unprepared for this transition. Important factors differentiating this college sample included their placement in college preparation classes (65.3%), participation in extra-curricular activities while in care (65.7%), and only attending one high school (51.9%). Participants reported that receiving information about financial aid and advising about college in general were particularly important factors in the decision to attend college. Interestingly, 63.8% of the sample felt that the foster care system did not prepare them very well for college and almost half of them felt that their financial situation was worse than other people their age (Merdinger et al.). In addition, 35% had accessed mental health services since their discharge from care, suggesting that despite relative academic success, these youth may nevertheless continue to suffer from ongoing emotional consequences as a result of their tumultuous backgrounds.

Implications of the Research Literature

Summary

This literature review has defined resilience as the ability to adapt and do well despite the presence of many risk factors, and examined a variety of factors and processes that have been found to interactively contribute to resilient outcomes at the individual, familial, and community level. The concept of emerging adulthood was introduced and described in some detail. Finally, this review has demonstrated the significant social implications of foster care in Canada. There is considerable personal cost to children in care, part of which stems from their traumatic history in their family of origin, but also as a result of systemic factors that may do them a disservice once they are in government care. There is also a noteworthy cost to society when children in care experience poor adult outcomes. If they are unable to become self-sufficient, productive, emotionally stable members of society, they will place additional burdens on an already taxed network of social services.

Focus and Significance of the Present Study

The vast majority of the literature examined here has been quantitative in nature, resulting in a very numerical understanding of resilience factors and processes, and outcomes for emerging adults and former foster youth. A few qualitative studies have given us a richer, more in-depth look at the situations of these individuals, such as the Hines et al (2005) study of former foster youth in post-secondary education. However, the Hines et al. sample seems unique in that most of the participants had been identified as gifted and many placed in Advanced Placement/ Honours educational programs. The present study aims to contribute to this body of literature with another sample of participants.

When the foster youth outcome literature is considered in concert with the emerging adulthood literature, it seems obvious that pursuing post-secondary education is a critical determinant of more positive adult outcomes. It increases emerging adults' employability and the likelihood of a more secure financial future. Given the statistics on adult outcomes for former foster youth, the pursuit of post-secondary studies can be understood as a resilient outcome. There is still considerable debate in the literature regarding which factors are most important in contributing to resilient outcomes; are they factors within the individual, or are they social process factors, such as the presence of mentoring relationships in the lives of at-risk youth growing up in the foster care system? The purpose of the current study is to get a rich, descriptive look at the factors that former foster youth who are currently pursuing post-secondary education attribute to their success.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that were helpful in producing resilience in the lives of a sample of Canadian emerging adults who grew up in foster care. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with four foster care alumni currently pursuing post-secondary education in order to achieve a rich description of the processes acting within their individual lives and contexts that have allowed them to be academically successful.

The goal of qualitative research is to achieve an in-depth understanding and to produce a passionate (as opposed to clinical and objective) reconstruction of participants, events, processes, experiences, etc. "Qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.3). The researcher attempts to understand phenomena in their natural settings by the meanings that people bring to them. In a study involving human participants such as this one, the researcher strives to "understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam, 2002a, p.38). I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to collect a detailed understanding of the lives of emerging adult foster care alumni and the meaning of their foster care histories for who and where they are in their lives currently.

Process of the Inquiry

Selection Criteria and Participant Recruitment

My initial recruitment strategy was to locate 5-6 students at the University of Alberta (U of A) who "grew up" in foster care – operationally defined as having spent at least 12 months in care prior to the age of 18 – and who were between the ages of 18-25 in accordance with Arnett's (2006) definition of emerging adulthood. Advertisements were posted around the U of A campus (see Appendix A for recruitment poster sample).

This recruitment strategy did not work – there were no responses. It was more difficult to find participants who met the selection criteria than expected, further reinforcing how uncommon it is for former foster youth to attend university.

I then obtained contact information for an employee of the Advancing Futures Bursary program, and a new strategy was devised to send a recruitment letter to all students receiving the Bursary who were currently attending the U of A, Grant MacEwan College, the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT), and NorQuest College in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. In order to qualify for the bursary, students must be between the ages of 18 and 22 years of age, and "must have had a Permanent Guardianship Order (PGO) between the time they were 13 and 18 years old, **or** have been in the care or custody of Alberta Children and Youth Services for at least 546 days between the time they were 13 and 22 years old" (Government of Alberta, 2007). As a result, all students receiving the Advancing Futures Bursary fit the three selection criteria of a) being emerging adults between the ages of 18-25; b) having "grown up" in foster care; and c) being currently enrolled in post-secondary education. However, this new recruitment strategy did not discriminate between types of post-secondary programs, therefore the definition of "post-secondary education" was broadened to include any degree or diploma program, as well as upgrading courses to complete a high school diploma with the intention of pursuing further post-secondary studies. Finding "cases" that are rich sources of information about a particular phenomenon, in this case resilient foster care alumni, is an example of purposive sampling (Drapeau et al., 2007). Like the foster youth in Drapeau et al.'s study, the participants in this study were selected for "their exemplary characteristics, rather than for their statistical representativeness of a population" (p.983), which is consistent with the objectives of qualitative research.

Recruitment letters were dropped off at the Advancing Futures Bursary program office and mailed out by Advancing Futures staff with bursary cheques at the end of November 2007 (see Appendix B for a copy of the recruitment letter). Two participants were interviewed as a result of this recruitment strategy. The other two participants were obtained through personal contacts using snowball sampling, and were also recipients of the Advancing Futures Bursary.

Interview Process and Informed Consent

Interviews were set up by phone or email and arranged for a convenient time and location for each individual participant. Although each participant consented verbally to take part in the study when the interview was set up, informed consent was discussed in more detail when participants arrived for the interview. First, any questions about the study and/or the Informed Consent Form were answered. Next, participants were asked to read and sign the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C). A copy of the consent form was then given to the participant to keep. The consent form described the purpose of the study, the steps that would be taken to maintain confidentiality, and how the interview data would be used. Participants were also reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were then asked to complete a brief demographics questionnaire, which was identified only by their participant ID number (see Appendix D).

Interviews, which lasted between one and two hours, were digitally recorded and transcribed by either the researcher or a hired transcriptionist. The transcriptionist also signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix E) in order to protect the privacy of participants. Participants were given pseudonyms during the transcription process, and any other names that were mentioned during the interview were also changed.

Participants were invited to review the interview transcripts in order to verify accuracy and to ensure that they felt it was a valid representation of their life experience and circumstances. Two participants declined this offer; the other two had no feedback about their transcripts.

Prior to the interview, a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix F) was designed as a guide to ensure that certain topics were covered in each of the interviews. Topic areas and wording of the questions were finalized through consultation with colleagues; one who works with youth in foster care, and several others who have experience and expertise in the area of designing and administering qualitative research interviews. In addition to the questions on the interview schedule, clarifying questions were asked and other themes that emerged within each individual interview were followed up. After the interview was complete, each participant received a thank-you card with my contact information, encouraging participants to call or email if they had any questions at a later time. The cards also contained a $20 gift card for Chapters bookstore as a token of appreciation for the participant's contribution to the study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process (Merriam, 2002b). Tentative themes and ideas to pursue in subsequent interviews were noted after each interview while constantly keeping in mind the purpose of the study (Merriam, 1998). In the first phase of the analysis, each interview was listened to several times and a brief narrative was constructed for each participant. The narratives focused on the participants' individual foster care histories and experiences, but also highlighted factors each of them believed to be important to their current success. Participants were once again contacted and asked to review the narratives and consent for them to be used in written documents. Participants were invited to edit the narratives and provide general feedback, and any requested changes were made. Two participants provided feedback, and only one requested that some minor details be amended.

The second phase of data analysis involved identifying common themes and patterns within and across transcripts (Merriam, 2002a). The goal of this phase was to construct an understanding of how participants made sense of their experiences in the foster care system and the factors to which they attribute their academic success. The process for this phase can be likened to that proposed by Merriam (1998) for a multiple case study. The first part of the search for themes occurred by looking for them to emerge from the transcripts of each interview in isolation, what Merriam calls "within case analysis" (1998, p.194). This was followed by "cross-case" analysis, where the emerging themes were matched between cases in a "constant comparative method of data analysis" (p.183). All themes chosen for subsequent analysis and presentation in the results section were present in several, if not all interviews.

Trustworthiness

Determining whether a given qualitative research project is a "good" study is different than evaluating quantitative research. Qualitative research is based on a worldview that sees people as "active, purposeful agents, engaged in co-constructing a world of meaning" (McLeod, 1999, p.117). Data collection is also not objective, as data are being filtered through the researcher's perception and interpreted almost immediately. This idea rests on the philosophical premise that "reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality" (Merriam, 1998, p.22). However, individual interpretations of reality can be obtained directly through qualitative interviews and observations (Merriam, 1998), and if these data are handled properly, an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon can be achieved. Consumers of qualitative research need to be able to determine if findings are authentic and trustworthy enough for practical application. Is there some degree of security upon which to base changes in social policy or legislation, for example, as a result of a given study? Merriam argues that "research results… are trustworthy to the extent that there has been some accounting for their validity and reliability" (p.198). Although the concepts of validity and reliability as they are understood in a positivist, quantitative paradigm do not transfer directly to the qualitative realm, there are ways to ensure that qualitative research is solid and trustworthy.

Internal Validity

Internal validity is concerned with whether the findings of a given study are congruent with reality (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative research, assumptions about the nature of reality make this an impossible task, because reality is not thought to be a static, universal entity that can be consistently grasped. There are nevertheless methods to ensure that the findings of a qualitative study are credible, i.e., that the interpreted and co-constructed realities of participants are clearly communicated in the results (Morse & Field, 1995). One method of enhancing the internal validity of a qualitative study is *triangulation* (Merriam, 1998). This can be accomplished by using multiple data sources and/or investigators. In the current study, it was not possible to review multiple data sources for an individual case, nor use multiple investigators. However, each in-depth participant case was compared with the others in the study, as well as with available findings from the literature, allowing the reader to develop a sense of the genuineness of the findings. This latter technique is also known as theoretical verification (Morse & Field). On the other hand, Mathison argues that triangulation may produce inconsistencies and contradictions among the data, and suggests that it is important to maintain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon in question when coming up with plausible explanations for findings (Merriam, 1998). *Member checks*, another strategy to enhance internal validity, were also used in this study. Member checks involve consulting with participants about emerging themes, findings, and conclusions, as well as having them verify the accuracy of the data obtained from interviews (Merriam, 1998). *Peer examination* was also used; the researcher's supervisor was used as a "sounding board" for emerging findings, and invited to comment on their apparent validity given the data available.

Finally, transparency regarding the researcher's biases and assumption helps the reader to determine whether these are unduly affecting the interpretation of data. Prior to conducting this study, I had several expectations about what I would find in my interviews with participants. First, I expected that mentorship would be the key factor in the success of my participants. As a counsellor-in-training, I also anticipated that any participants who had received psychological services during their time in foster care would have found them to be beneficial. Furthermore, I expected the foster care histories of my participants to have extensive similarities. None of these expectations were validated, and indeed some of my findings were quite unexpected. As a result, I discarded all of my initial biases and assumptions in order to become open to the possibilities that the data had to offer.

Reliability

In quantitative studies, it is generally accepted that the way to determine if a result is reliable is if it can be replicated. Obtaining the same result at different points in time suggests that the "truth" has been found with some degree of confidence. In a qualitative study on the other hand, reality is a co-construction of human beings, and therefore only exists at a particular moment in time. In qualitative studies therefore, instead of asking whether a result can be replicated, reliability is best addressed by asking whether the findings and conclusions of a study rest solidly upon the data on which they are based. Lincoln and Guba call this "dependability" or "consistency" (Merriam, 1998). Are the results consistent with the data that has been collected? Would others agree that the conclusions that have been reached are plausible, given the particular data set? Merriam suggests that using triangulation, being transparent about the assumptions and theory upon which the study is based, and clearly communicating how results were derived all enhance the reliability of a qualitative study.

External Validity

In the traditional sense, external validity is determined by the generalizability of results to other situations and cases. However, as Merriam (1998) states, "in qualitative research, a single case or small non-random sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p.208). In the current study, it is the richness of the detail that allows us to establish what makes these emerging adults determined to pursue post-secondary education and gives the study its power. Instead, Merriam suggests that external validity is enhanced when the cases of the participants are presented in sufficient detail for the reader to be able to make judgments about whether the findings might be similar, and therefore applicable, to their own situation. This is alternatively called "descriptive validity" (McLeod, 1999, p.18), "naturalistic generalization" or "reader/user generalizability" (Merriam, 1998, p.211). Finally, Merriam argues that using a multisite design can enhance generalizability. In the current study, this has been partially achieved in that each of the participants was attending a different post-secondary institution. This makes the results more generalizable than if the original recruitment strategy of finding all participants at the U of A had been successful.

CHAPTER IV: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

Each child who passes through the foster care system has a unique story. This story is made up of the circumstances surrounding their apprehension by Social Services, their history in the foster care system, and the "outcome" of these experiences in their lives when they reach adulthood. In order to get a holistic understanding of the four young women who participated in this research study and the factors that they attribute to their success, each of their "stories" is presented below as a brief narrative, which was checked with the participant for accuracy. Narratives are retold as they were communicated to the researcher, and are therefore depicting events and characters through the "lens" of the participant. This lens is a product of their experiences and a variety of other factors that cause them to present their lives from a certain perspective, an issue that will be discussed further in the next chapter. These narratives will also provide the context for the thematic analysis that follows.

Mariah

> I think gymnastics was a really big part of my life. Gymnastics teaches you huge discipline and control… and just being around normal people, good people. It was that one thing where I was able to shine, be something. I was something. More than just this worthless little foster child. I had talent and I could go somewhere and I could really do something…
>
> Mariah, January 2008

Mariah lived with her birth mother until she was about five years old. Her mother suffered from drug addictions and had nine children, all with different fathers. Consequently, Mariah never met her father. After Mariah was taken into foster care, she believed that her mother was dead and only much later learned that she had been incarcerated for attempted murder. In her mid-teens, Mariah saw her mother after she was released from jail, but said it was like meeting a total stranger. Mariah was in care with her half sister Melissa for many years, but reports that Melissa is currently living on the streets in Edmonton and struggling with multiple addictions and mental health issues, including FAS, ADHD, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. A few years ago Melissa physically attacked Mariah, and ever since she has chosen not to have a relationship with any of her birth family members. She vows that the only reason she will get in touch with them is so that she can obtain her official Métis status.

When asked about her experience in foster care, Mariah comments that she would rather have an abortion than ever put a child through life in adoptive/foster care. In her first foster home, which was in a rural area, she remembers getting in trouble for talking with Melissa after "lights out" and getting put outside together in the dark with nothing but their boots and pyjamas on as punishment, even in the middle of winter. Despite this, Mariah asserts that she was one of the favoured children in that home and got into trouble less than the other children because she always smiled and never cried. In her second foster placement, there was considerable marital conflict between the foster parents and her foster father had a drinking problem. In addition, their biological daughter who was two years older and shared a room with Mariah sexually abused her. Mariah knew that her foster parents would never take her word over their daughter's, so she suffered in silence.

When Mariah was about 8 years old, she and Melissa were adopted by Melissa's teacher. At first this seemed to be a good placement. The family had land and animals and was relatively well-off; Mariah remembers feeling spoiled and having more Christmas presents than she had ever seen before. However, the foster family's four older biological children didn't adjust very well to having two adopted sisters, and Mariah feels that they never liked her. Shortly after her adoption, she was put in gymnastics. This turned out to be a highly significant experience, as she had a natural talent for the sport and was quickly placed into an advanced training group. Mariah's adoptive father, who worked out of town, loved seeing her succeed in gymnastics. He made time for her as often as possible and spent a great deal of money on coaching and fees so that she could continue in the sport. This did not improve Mariah's relationship with her adoptive siblings, who couldn't compete for their father's attention. One day when Mariah was about 10 years old, she complained to her mother that she didn't want to do gymnastics because she was missing a birthday party to go to practice, which was a three hour round trip away. Her mother had her quit the next day. Mariah believes that her mother should have encouraged her to continue in gymnastics, but was tired of spending so much time driving her to practices so she did not put up a fight. Mariah's father was extremely angry and stopped talking to her for about a month, except to tell her she "could have been there" when he watched gymnastics on TV. After this, everything about the adoptive placement seemed to go downhill.

Mariah felt emotionally abused by her adoptive parents because she was constantly accused of lying and assumed to be making trouble. In addition, her father began to criticize her for being provocative because she continued to walk like a gymnast, with her chest sticking out. When she was about 12 years old, she was sent to a group home to be treated for her lack of emotionality; her adoptive mother thought she needed to cry and deal with her emotions so that she could be more sympathetic to others. Mariah argues that she had developed a detached way of being as a coping mechanism to some of her early experiences – she remembers never crying, even as a young child. She was only at the group home for two weeks before staff said she would likely get worse, not better if she stayed as a result of learning negative behaviours from the other kids. Mariah was respectful toward adults and followed the rules, and felt rewarded when the staff told her she didn't belong. After a few uneventful months in another foster home, she went back to her adoptive family. By this time her sister had also been sent to a group home for her unmanageable behaviour, and life for Mariah seemed increasingly bleak. Mariah remembers having "outside time" every day, but having nothing to do outside once her sister was gone, especially in the winter. She tried to spend the time napping in the wood shed with the cats to stay warm, but once her foster mother caught on she would make Mariah stand in the yard where she could see her from her chair in front of the TV. Mariah often felt like a slave, being asked to pick weeds until her fingers were green and cut open, being asked to get things like water and Kleenex for her mother while she had a friend over, being asked to dust and polish her father's mug collection. She described another incident where her father couldn't find a fancy Swiss Army knife so accused her of stealing it to give to the boy she had a crush on at school. She was not allowed to have any of her Christmas gifts until the knife was returned, which was difficult since she had not taken the knife in the first place. As a result, Mariah spent one entire Christmas Day in her bedroom.

Eventually, Mariah started to complain about her home life to her friends at school. She had worked hard to develop a good group of friends, and this support network began to fulfill a family-like role. Her best friend Elizabeth constantly told her that the way her parents treated her was unfair and abnormal, and one day Elizabeth encouraged Mariah to call Social Services and tell them she was being mistreated. As a result, just before her 14th birthday, Mariah was "unadopted." She returned to her previous foster home, and this time it was a positive experience. She found it gratifying that her foster parents told her social worker that she was a pleasure to have around, and she was able to act as a role model for younger foster kids in the home. She became friends with the daughter who had sexually abused her, although they then got into some trouble for throwing a party, which resulted in Mariah running away. Mariah was in another foster home after this one, and then moved in with her friend Elizabeth and her family until she finished high school at the age of 17. She then moved to Edmonton with some friends where she did some upgrading and then began her post-secondary program.

Mariah attributes her current success primarily to gymnastics, which taught her discipline, boosted her self-confidence, and gave her hope for the future. She also states that she would not be where she is today without the help and influence of her friend Elizabeth and Elizabeth's upstanding family. Finally, she asserts that she has always had a good sense of right and wrong, been able to learn from her mistakes, maintained a positive attitude, and looked past her current circumstances to envision a better future for herself. Although she is a little worried about finishing school and having to work full-time without any support from Social Services, she argues that her life story is all about succeeding and she doesn't see failure as an option. At the age of 20, she now feels that anything is possible, and she will do what is necessary to achieve her goals.

Grace

> I really just think that it's part of my personality to just be independent and not rely on people and go after what I want. Even this whole school thing; it was just like I was never going to get there and it was test after test after test. A lot of people were saying "why don't you just give up?" And I'd say, "nope, I want a

frickin' degree and I'm gonna get it"... Now I'm at that end, and for the first time I'm confident that I'm gonna be okay.

Grace, January 2008

Grace spent her childhood in rural Alberta with her parents, an older brother, and two younger sisters. When she was seven her parents divorced and for several years she moved back and forth between her two parents' homes. Grace's mother had many untreated mental health issues, including depression, which prevented her from parenting effectively or remaining employed. Grace's brother returned to live with their father, and Grace was left essentially parenting her younger sisters. She got a part time job washing dishes at a local restaurant at the age of 11 so that she could help to feed and clothe herself and her sisters. When she was 12, ongoing conflict between her and her mother reached an unbearable level, so she stopped coming home. She worked after school and then stayed with friends. Child and Family Services was already supporting Grace's family, and at this time she was sent to live with her father despite the fact that she threatened to run away. Subsequently she fled her father's home and came to Edmonton with some friends, where they were mistakenly arrested for attempted robbery because they were in the wrong vehicle. The police discovered that Grace had been reported missing and when they asked her where she wanted to go she replied "foster care." She is the only one of her siblings that was in foster care.

Grace spent the next three months in a Youth Assessment Centre, which was a negative experience. She felt she didn't fit in with her peers there, many of whom had extreme conduct issues and/or self-harming behaviours. She was then moved to her first foster home, which also only lasted three months because the foster family's adult son sexually abused her. Her second foster home was a good fit, but because it was a receiving and assessment home Grace was not permitted to remain there despite having the foster parents lobby Social Services to allow her to stay. Her third foster placement was successful however, and Grace lived with this family from just before she turned 13 until she was almost 18 years old. In fact, she has gone back to live with Rose and Bob twice since reaching adulthood, and was living with them at the time of the interview.

Grace is currently working to rebuild a relationship with her father, but has not had any contact with her mother in 8 years. Shortly after moving in with Rose and Bob, Social Services attempted to have her return to live with her mother. Rose drove Grace to drop off some of her belongings, and her mother was in the middle of a "midnight move," supposedly to get away from Grace's father, although he was about to remarry. Rose was angry, and asked Grace's mother how she could treat a child this way. Grace says this was the first time anyone had ever really stuck by her and advocated for her. She believes that Rose and Bob played a key role in her current success. Living under their roof she was held to reasonable expectations. She says "they didn't let me get away with any crap," but also gave her space to make mistakes or to vent if she was having a bad day, while encouraging her to do well in school and be involved in sports.

High school was a difficult time for Grace. At this time a lot of suppressed emotions came to the surface and she felt angry and cheated that she didn't have a loving relationship with her birth parents. In addition, she began to develop anxiety about being on her own. In grade 12 she began to have panic attacks that she might be removed from Rose and Bob's home before her 18th birthday. Due to the unpredictable nature of foster care, she felt that there was no guarantee that she would be allowed to stay. In the end Grace graduated from high school before her 18th birthday and did move out on her own, but Rose gave her the money she was getting from Social Services to help her pay her rent and damage deposit until she was 18.

Grace, now 22, still experiences a lot of anxiety around her finances, and she has coped with this by always working several jobs. She acknowledges that she also has a few other compulsions, such as keeping her life very structured and organized. Once she completes her studies, she wants to be able to relax a little more and have fun with her youth. She feels that she grew up too quickly as a result of her circumstances and that she has always been "Miss Responsible," trying to show that she could make something of her life despite being in foster care. On the other hand, Grace believes that her independent, strong-willed personality was a critical factor in her success. She was undeterred by the obstacles she faced: she argued with her social workers to get funding to pay for her high school graduation dress and she wrote letters to her MLA begging to be supported to go on to post-secondary (as it turns out, this was during the time when the Advancing Futures Bursary was being developed). She also faced several more battles to get into the academic programs she wanted and to get her education funded despite the fact that she was doing studies by correspondence. Through all of this, Grace refused to give up her dream of getting a University degree.

Grace acknowledges that her story is not as "bad" as some of her peers who also grew up in foster care. She mentions speaking at a Foster Parents Association meeting and feeling that she disappointed the audience because she couldn't say she was severely abused and then rescued by foster care and is now successful. On the other hand, Grace asserts that she has never "played the foster care card." She believes that everyone needs to manage their life's circumstances to the best of their abilities and take responsibility for creating a positive outcome instead of blaming others and playing a victim role. This is a quality that sets Grace apart from her peers.

Amy

> My social worker constantly told me that I would never be anybody and never do anything with my life… But throughout it all within myself I said I was going to finish high school. Because people are telling me that I can't – I'm going to do it. I'm a very stubborn person, when somebody tells me I can't do it, I will do it… When I got accepted into [name of post secondary program], she said "You will never be successful, you won't do this." And I was like – screw you, watch me!!!
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> Amy, February 2008

Amy entered foster care at the age of 13. Prior to this, she bounced back and forth between living with her mother and her grandparents in another province. Amy's mother was an alcoholic and had a string of different male partners. When her relationships fell apart, she would often disappear for many days, leaving Amy and her younger sister with a babysitter until eventually the babysitter would call Amy's grandparents to pick up the girls. Amy is seven years older than her sister, and for many years was essentially her sister's primary caregiver. When she was 12 her grandfather, who she was very close to, became ill. This meant that her grandparents were no longer able to care for her and her sister when, as Amy puts it, their mother "screwed up." She knew at this point that it was only a matter of time before she would end up in foster care. Around this time, Amy became physically abusive toward her sister, using her as an outlet for her intense anger about her life's circumstances. She developed suicidal ideation and began to self-harm. She was hospitalized in the psychiatric unit and Child Welfare became involved. A few months and another hospital stay later she was finally apprehended from her school by

Social Services with nothing but the clothes on her back. Her sister stayed with their mother at that time. Amy also had a brother who was seven years older and who lived with her grandparents. She idolized him throughout her childhood and continued to do so even after he committed suicide when she was 14. This resulted in her spending a lot of time during her teen years in psychiatric units and secure treatment facilities. Amy has never met her father.

Amy's time in foster care was chaotic. She has moved a total of 56 times in her life and changed schools 42 times. While in care she had four social workers. Her first worker was a positive influence, and the next two were very short-term. One of them began to cry when Amy told her about her brother's suicide, causing Amy to wonder how she would be able to support her. Amy recalls that this worker didn't last very long in the profession of social work. The worker with whom she had the longest relationship regularly told her she would never be anybody or do anything in her life. Amy refers to this worker as her "weakest link."

Of her nine foster homes, one was positive for Amy. However, it was an assessment and treatment placement, so she was unable to stay there for more than brief periods of time. Amy takes responsibility for the breakdown of her placements, saying she would let her behaviour get out of control because she knew they would take her back to the foster home she liked. In this home, she recalls that her needs and wants were always met and that her foster mom was supportive and encouraged her to finish high school. There were also two younger biological children that she was very fond of and strove to be a positive role model for. Finally, Child Welfare agreed that she could stay in this placement until she turned 18, but Amy recalls that for some reason this caused her to act out, which precipitated the ending of this placement. Three weeks before her 18th birthday, Amy found herself on the streets with nowhere to turn. Child Welfare refused to support her any further and she did not yet qualify for any adult support or programming. She went to a women's shelter, where she met Shelly, a Child and Youth worker who knew of Amy from her practicum and who said to Amy right at the outset "I'll never give up on you." Amy tried to push her away; acting out, telling Shelly she hated her, breaking down more placements that Shelly helped her to get. But Shelly stuck around and Amy now identifies her brief stay in the women's shelter as a turning point.

Nevertheless, Amy's life continued on a destructive path for a few more years. By this time she was regularly using drugs and alcohol, and eventually was investigated for trafficking prescription medication and attempted murder after one of the other women living in the same YWCA residence came close to an overdose after taking her medication. Although all charges were dropped, Amy was prohibited from returning to the YWCA and so moved in with friends where she continued her self-destructive behaviour. She was registered in high school but had always struggled academically and stopped attending because the school was so large that she became overwhelmed with anxiety. Eventually, with some help from Shelly, Amy moved into a supervised independent living facility and completed her high school diploma through an Outreach school. Around this time, she ran into her first social worker, who informed her about the Advancing Futures bursary. Amy decided to apply for a diploma program, not really believing she would be accepted after having heard so often in her life that she would never amount to anything. When she was accepted, Shelly warned her that the program would be challenging, and she was right. Amy says that she has learned a lot about herself in the program but that it has been difficult. In her first year of post-secondary, her mother was arrested for stealing $40,000 from her workplace and she found herself supporting herself and her 14-year-old sister, of whom she became official guardian, on a $735/month bursary. She took a year off to work and get her head together and became involved with Youth Strategies, a volunteer organization that seeks input from youth about social problems. Amy realized that youth could have a voice and make positive changes, and this encouraged her to finish her program.

In the few months since our interview Amy has successfully graduated from her program at the age of 24. She continues to struggle with anxiety, but feels she is now equipped to make positive, healthy choices for herself and has a clear idea of where her life is going. She gives Shelly a lot of credit for believing in her and supporting her despite her bad behaviour. Amy also believes her stubbornness and her "I'll show you" attitude were critical ingredients of her current success.

Chloe

> My foster mom made me think about it and made me realize that just because things are not beneficial to some people, I could choose to take my past as a positive, saying that, you know, I wouldn't be the person that I am today. I consider myself to be a strong person, I consider myself to be intelligent and wise, and a lot of my friends look up to me. I wouldn't have these qualities if I didn't come from such a "unique" background…
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> Chloe, January 2008

Chloe was taken from her birth family at the age of two. Her mother suffered from drug and alcohol addictions, and her boyfriends abused Chloe. Her mother died when she was five, and after that Chloe stopped receiving information about her birth family. She had many older siblings, but almost all of them have died of disease, drugs, or suicide. She currently has one living half-brother, but has no relationship with him.

Chloe's first foster home was a positive experience, but eventually her birth grandmother accused her foster mother of having an affair with her grandfather, and as a result she was removed from this home when she was about five years old. Chloe was then placed with a Native family for four years, where she had the opportunity to learn a little more about her ancestral cultural traditions. This home was extremely crowded, with four biological children, five foster children, two parents, and a grandmother all under one roof. Chloe's foster mother became increasingly physically abusive as time progressed, but it wasn't until the children were exhibiting severe physical signs of abuse that they were removed from the home. For the next year, Chloe went through several other foster placements as she struggled with negative behavioural sequelae from the abuse.

Chloe's longest foster placement spanned the ages of 10 to 15. She refers to her foster mom Tina as "Crazy Lady," and recounts emotional abuse in this home, which she asserts was worse than the physical abuse from her previous foster placement. Chloe became extremely anxious, often having panic attacks on the bus on the way home from school. This radically affected her education as well, as she was so anxious that she was unable to concentrate. On the other hand, there were also some positive consequences for Chloe's time under Tina's roof. Tina forced her to go to counselling for several years, and Chloe eventually decided to make the most of therapy, which allowed her to heal from the physical abuse she experienced in the previous foster home. Tina also had her do some volunteer work in a group home where many of the residents had similar backgrounds to Chloe. She saw a girl her age there that was pregnant and dealing with a methamphetamine addiction, and this caused her to consciously resolve not to use drugs or alcohol, something she thinks has been an important factor in her success. Finally, Chloe was always involved in extracurricular sports, which allowed her to escape the abuse and be a "normal" child for a few hours a week.

When Chloe was 15, Tina took her to a treatment centre, accusing her of being a drug addict, a prostitute, and doing voodoo on her, all of which Chloe feels was unwarranted. After a month of assessment and therapy, Chloe was released but chose not to return to Tina's home and was placed for about eight months with a woman named Alex. This is a placement she has fond memories of, and describes Alex as one of her mentors. Alex taught her to cook (a skill she has since used to support herself), and helped her to realize that her challenging life circumstances could be reframed more positively as having contributed to her strong character. Chloe also admired Alex's dedication to her family, having raised four children as a single mom. Eventually, Chloe returned to Tina's home for a month, but this went badly and as a result she has been living on her own since the age of 15. These events created a very rocky start to high school for Chloe, and led to her eventually dropping out of school altogether.

For the next couple of years, Chloe lived in basement suites with friends or boyfriends, unsupported by Social Services. At the age of 16, she began to think about pursuing post-secondary education, but was unable to go back to school because she had to work full time to pay the bills. Eventually, she began to accept some support from Social Services again in the form of a grocery allowance. Around the time she turned 18, the Advancing Futures Bursary program came into being, and Chloe's social worker contacted her to advise her that she was eligible to apply for funding. Nevertheless, it took her a couple more years to create a sufficiently stable life for herself to be able to take advantage of the program. For a few years Chloe worked multiple jobs, desperately trying to make ends meet and be sure she had a "security net" in case something went wrong. Despite this, Chloe occasionally found herself broke and homeless and relying on friends for shelter. She has now been living with the same boyfriend for a couple of years, and one of her goals is to maintain this stability.

Chloe, now 21, is currently working on upgrading and completing her high school courses so that she can apply for University. She is interested in both psychology and business marketing. She has discovered that when she is able to focus on school and is not plagued by emotional difficulties, she is able to achieve honours marks. She has also discovered that her artwork is an effective method of "self-therapy." Chloe now sees her turbulent childhood as a positive influence on who she is today, despite the fact that it forced her to grow up quickly and that she would not want to have to live through it again. Chloe feels that she has come a very long way from her 15-year-old self, who had extremely low self-esteem, hid the fact that she was in foster care from her peers, and desperately wanted to run away. This year Chloe has "turned over a new leaf:" returning to school and doing well, trying new hobbies, and setting new goals. She feels extremely optimistic about her future and her ability to deal with any further obstacles that come her way.

CHAPTER V: RESULTS

The following section will explore the themes that emerged from the interviews with Mariah, Amy, Grace, and Chloe about factors that contributed to their resilience. Each of the themes can be conceptually housed under one "umbrella" theme entitled "Construction of the Self," which seems to be a critical component of the success of these emerging adults who grew up in foster care. Subsequently, what each young woman articulated about her educational history and her early expectations for educational attainment, as well as her experience of post-secondary and perceived barriers to post-secondary school attendance faced by other former youth in care will be described. At this point the reader will be able to appreciate the participants' post-secondary attainment as a culmination of the factors previously discussed.

Construction of the Self

All four participants in this study survived traumatic events in childhood, yet they demonstrated very positive current self-concepts. This is particularly interesting given that they all reported having held very negative beliefs about themselves during their childhood and/or adolescence. The theme of self-construction, as well as all of the other related themes that emerged from interview transcripts, will be discussed in more detail below. It is important to note that these themes reflect complex human experiences and are all interconnected, therefore the order of their presentation is somewhat arbitrary.

Early Negative Self-Constructions: "My teenage self wouldn't recognize me now"

Of the four young women in this study, Amy acknowledged having the most troubled self-concept in her teen years. She also disclosed the most delinquent behaviour, which is likely directly related to the way that she was feeling about herself and her life. Throughout her adolescence, Amy described resisting every attempt made to help her, refusing medications, and generally pushing everyone away. She bought into the negative words and expectations of others, and turned to drugs, alcohol, and criminal activity, thinking there was no point in being well-behaved since "I'd never be anybody, right?" This created a vicious cycle where Amy's negative beliefs about herself were reinforced by foster parents saying they could no longer "handle" her (a rejection), or by people choosing to keep their distance so that she would not lash out at them again. In addition, for most of her childhood Amy moved so often that she stopped trying to make or maintain any friendships, assuming she wouldn't be anywhere long enough to make it worth the effort. As a result, her negative beliefs about her self were further reinforced by the fact that she had no peer acceptance either.

Chloe described being embarrassed about being in foster care, and admitted that she often lied and told her peers that she was adopted, or tried to avoid talking about her family situation. She also stated that she was ashamed of herself as a teenager and had many feelings of wanting to hide from others. Chloe admitted that she wouldn't recognize herself today: "I'm not ashamed of my past; I'm not ashamed of who I am now, which is a lot more than I could say from when I was a teenager." Chloe is also amazed with the opportunities that she currently has, including being able to pursue post-secondary education. She argues that she would not have dared to expect or believe that such opportunities were possible.

Grace also described going through a difficult period during adolescence after she was living with Rose and Bob. The stability provided by their caring support allowed Grace to feel safe enough to let some of the grief regarding her rejection by her mother to resurface:

> There was just a period there where I was just really pissed off at everybody because I wanted my mom, I wanted my dad. I'd see people and their parents and I just started getting pissed off at my mom because I felt like I was really cheated out of that … like the people who should've loved me the most, loved me the least!

Pieces That Don't Quite Fit: Reconstructing Parts of the Self and the Past

Part of the process of reconstructing the self to be lovable and deserving of success in the present involves assembling the events of one's past in a way that is congruent with that current self. The events that each young woman described in their interview and the meanings and attributions that they gave these events reflected their current perceptions of the saliency of these contributing factors to their present success and identity. In some cases, the process of re-construction can be glimpsed as participants sort out which details to include and which to omit. For example, after providing extensive detail about negative experiences in her adoptive placement, Mariah skips over the end of her foster care history and returns to discussing contributing factors to her current success:

> I ended up running away actually and living with my friends for two weeks. And then I came back and then I lived in another foster home, but ... I don't know. Like I mean, things happen, I can't be perfect… I dunno… I just think that the main reasons that I succeeded is…

In this case, it would seem that Mariah has omitted details about behaviours that may have played a role in the breakdown of these last few foster placements. These "things" that happened don't fit with the rest of the narrative she has given. In the first half of the interview, Mariah described in great detail many of the negative things that happened to her while she was in foster care and in her adoptive placement. Mariah portrayed herself as a passive recipient of these events; they are hurts that she survived but played no part in creating. Admitting responsibility for placement breakdown would be incongruent with this construction. In the second half of the interview, Mariah explained the factors she believed to be important to her success, and in this she granted herself a much more active role. Highlighting this paradox is not meant in any way to judge Mariah or to detract from the credibility of her testimony, merely to illuminate the process of reconstruction.

Similarly, when Grace was initially taken into care, she was sent to a Youth Assessment Centre (YAC) for three months, but argues that she did not fit in because the other residents' behaviours were dramatically worse than hers. In her interview, Grace did not explicitly admit to very much acting out behaviour, although Social Services must have perceived a reason for her to be placed in the YAC. She explained: "I wasn't a bad kid; I just had nowhere to go" and further rationalizes "I just did not fit but they felt the need to keep me there." This construction demonstrates that Grace sees herself in a certain – more positive – way. Grace did mention that she was diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) while she still lived with her mother, and it was because of behaviours such as not coming home at night that she was sent to live with her father shortly before she was taken into foster care. Grace explained that when she moved in with Rose, they would joke about her being ODD or "odd" because her behaviour was much different. As a result, Grace thinks the diagnosis was invalid, when her perspective is that situation-specific may be more accurate. Her defiant behaviour was not who she "really" was, it was simply a symptom of pain. By constructing it in this way, this piece of Grace's story fits with her current perception of herself.

All four participants in this study reported being diagnosed with a variety of disorders and dismissing these diagnoses as invalid. They inferred that they viewed these as permanent labels designed to reflect an underlying characteristic of the self. Chloe was diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE) as an explanation for why she was unable to learn at the same rate as her peers. She explained: "They've given me a couple labels, they even tried to put me on a couple of medications, stuff like that, I just refused to, I just, I don't think I have those problems." Chloe argued that intense anxiety related to her abusive home life prevented her from being capable of focusing on school as opposed to FAE. Chloe was also identified as having an Attachment Disorder and Tourette's Syndrome. She now says "I don't know if I really believe in attachment disorders that much" and argues that the Tourette's diagnosis is preposterous, that it would be obvious if she had that disorder. This may partially reflect a lack of understanding on Chloe's part about these disorders; Chloe admitted that her understanding of attachment disorders is limited. However, the unwavering fashion in which Chloe stated that these labels did not apply to her suggested that they were highly inconsistent with her view of herself and therefore unacceptable. Rejecting these diagnoses allows Chloe to reconstruct herself and her past in a way that is more congruent with her current positive perception of herself.

Amy also recalls being diagnosed with many different disorders, including bipolar disorder, ODD, and borderline personality disorder. Amy always resisted these diagnoses, saying "I'm not this, you guys just think I am." She states that there are "blank periods" in her memory due to overmedication for these disorders. When released from her hospitalizations, she would refuse to take medications prescribed by her psychiatrist. She now admits that she was making some poor decisions and that she coped with her emotions by self-harming instead, but she still does not believe any of the diagnoses were valid. She sees her negative, "screw you, I'm not going to listen to you" attitude as a positive force that prevented her from believing those diagnoses were a reflection of her true self:

> I don't think I ever really believed what they were saying to me. I've always been anti-labels, I hate labels, don't throw a label on me because – actually, the book that I just read is "Labels Belong on Soup Cans" and it's so true. I don't need to have a label to be who I am. This is who I am, now accept who I am.

Mariah explained in her interview that her adoptive mother put her on Ritalin, then in a mocking voice added "because, whatever, because I *needed* it." Interestingly, Mariah did not use the term Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), although presumably this diagnosis was a necessary precursor to her being prescribed Ritalin. At no point in the interview did Mariah describe any negative behaviour on her part. Mariah attributes some other symptoms to the medication: "I would end up falling asleep in class and become really emotional and cranky and yell at people and stuff, so really I didn't want to take it." When Mariah returned to foster care following the breakdown of her adoptive placement, her foster mother would forget to give her medication and Mariah purposefully would not remind her. Eventually her foster mother realized it had been several weeks since Mariah had taken Ritalin and that her behaviour was "you know, not rambunctious, bouncing off the walls, acting idiotic." At this point Mariah's foster mother asked her if she thought she needed to be on medication, and Mariah said she did not, arguing that she was doing well academically. Mariah's perception was that her adoptive mother had her taking Ritalin unnecessarily.

Other examples of past reconstruction include Mariah and Chloe's versions of being sent to treatment centres/group homes. Not unlike Grace, neither of them attributes their admission to legitimate issues. Mariah reported that she was sent to a group home because her adoptive mother believed she "needed to cry and open up [her] emotions." Although Mariah admits that she was not very sympathetic toward others as a result of all that she had been through, she recounts this as an illogical reason to be sent for treatment. Mariah remembers feeling that she had received external evidence that nothing was actually wrong with her when the group home staff said "she needs to leave because she's so much better than this and it's gonna make her a worse person." Mariah added:

> To hear them say "you're just, you're like the epitome of perfectness. We wish all our kids in our group home acted like you because you don't swear, you respect, you do your job, you go to bed at the right time blah blah blah." So that helped me to know that I'm going in the right track, and doing ok, and as much as my adoptive parents like to say that I'm worthless and whatnot, I'm not.

Chloe's memory is similar; she recounts that staff at the treatment centre she was sent to when she was 15 quickly determined that she was fine, but that she still had to stay there for about a month: "They tried to get me out sooner but Tina [foster mother] wouldn't let them." This assertion reveals Chloe's perception that her mother was controlling the decisions of treatment centre staff, which contributes to her understanding of herself as a strong and competent and not needing treatment. In both Mariah and Chloe's case, the "diagnosis" of treatment centre staff stating that they were actually "okay" is in stark opposition to the opinions of their foster/adoptive mothers, who are painted as the "villains" in their stories. From their descriptions, the relationships they had with their foster/adoptive mothers were certainly fraught with problems and abusive actions. However, there are enough exceptions to raise questions as to whether part of the story is a reconstruction of the self that utilizes the 15-year-old version of events to bolster the concept of the self as a relatively innocent and benign person caught in a bad situation, rather than accepting some responsibility for the outcomes they were experiencing.

Positive Re-Constructions: "I love who I am today"

For these young women, many different factors contributed to their ability to see themselves in a positive light. For example, over time Amy learned not to absorb the negative words and expectations of others, and has learned to love and accept herself as she is. She gives her mentor Shelly a lot of credit for believing in her when she didn't believe in herself and sticking around no matter how hard Amy tried to push her away. In addition, Amy has recently realized that her experiences – both positive and negative – can be of benefit to others. She has been invited to speak to foster parents about what some of the challenges are for foster children through her involvement with Youth Strategies, and as a result has been able to reframe her history as difficult, but character-building. She says:

> Somebody asked me, "if you could change anything in your life what would you change?" Absolutely nothing. You know, everything has happened to me but if one thing hadn't happened I wouldn't be who I am today, and I love who I am today. So why would I change anything about those experiences?

Chloe and Mariah also expressed acceptance of their pasts and their current selves. Chloe stated explicitly that she is not ashamed of her past or who she is, and Mariah argued that her willingness to talk about "everything" from her past is one characteristic that sets her apart from other foster children. She stated:

> Don't worry… I totally am comfortable with explaining anything and everything. I think that is a REALLY important reason why I succeeded in life and others

> haven't, is 'cause I can deal with it and I'm comfortable with it, and it doesn't upset me.

This statement also reflects an individual ability to move on and put life events in perspective, or to reframe them in a positive way – an ability that each of these young women exhibited.

From the participant interviews therefore, a commonality emerged. Although these young women reported feelings of unhappiness about their circumstances as adolescents, and a lack of belief that their lives would change in the future, they all exhibited a strong, positive self-concept in their interviews. They recounted an understanding of the events in their lives that was consistent with this current view of the self. This included not blaming themselves for some of the negative events in their lives and denying the validity of negative labels that were given to them by others. Finally, they expressed being happy with their lives currently. This was reported to be the result of accepting the past as an integral part of the current self. However, these foster care alumni also described some more specific factors that contributed to their success such as personality characteristics, mentorship, and finding a sense of purpose. These factors, along with a few others, will now be discussed.

Facilitating Factors

My Personality Was an Important Part of My Success

In their interviews, each of the participants highlighted some of the personality traits they believe were instrumental to their success. In addition, they commented on the type of people they consider themselves to be, saying things like "I'm someone who can forgive and forget" (Mariah); "I always had my own mind and I wasn't afraid to use it" (Grace); or "I get too ambitious sometimes" (Chloe), which provides insight into their current construction and understanding of themselves. They also demonstrated individual qualities in their interviews and told stories that implied certain characteristics that may have factored into resilient outcomes. Some of these characteristics may be innate while others may have developed over time as a result of other factors and experiences in their lives. Nature/nurture debate as to their origins aside, they can be examined as important contributors to the resilience process in general and also to the process of constructing the self.

The "I'll show you" attitude.

Perhaps one of the most unexpected and robust findings of this study was that all of the participants noted a stubborn streak in themselves: an intense determination to succeed fuelled by anger and a sense of injustice over their circumstances and/or the derogatory comments and negative expectations of other people in their lives. This is best described as having an "I'll show you" attitude. The "I'll show you" attitude is perhaps most evident in Amy when she says "when somebody tells me I can't do it, I will do it" and thinks "screw you, watch me!" in response to her social worker's comment that she would not be able to manage her post-secondary diploma program. In many ways, Amy's anger and negative attitude was a double-edged sword, leading to much delinquent behaviour as a teen. It wasn't until recently that she was able to redirect her anger and sense of injustice to more positive ends. Amy's anger over how she was treated in foster care also led her to believe that she could do a better job of helping foster children, which was one of the factors that inspired her to pursue a diploma in a field related to child welfare. The "I'll show you" attitude and underlying anger may be a critical ingredient to the process of reconstruction because it reveals a belief in the intrinsic value of the self.

This attitude can also be understood as a feeling of having something to prove. Grace, Chloe, and Amy all described a fierce desire to demonstrate that they could be successful despite their challenging backgrounds. Grace recounted that the social worker she had when she was in high school doubted that she would graduate. Grace interpreted this as an attempt to prevent her from believing that she could be successful. As a result, she said she always felt that she needed to "prove everybody wrong," and that she could do this by successfully completing high school and then going on to pursue a post-secondary University degree. While this has been an important motivating force that has helped Grace to get where she is today, it has also been an emotional burden. When failure was not an option, it created considerable pressure and stress:

> People look at you so badly when you're in foster care, and you kind of come out wanting to show everybody, like "I'm responsible... Look! I'm responsible! And I turned out OK!" And for me I mean I don't think I take it overboard because I'm not completely uptight but I just forget to relax and enjoy life because I'm so worried about showing people that I'm successful and proving to people that I could do it. I know I can do it, and they know I can do it, but it's just that pattern.

In addition, Grace stated that having something to prove has added to her maturity. All four participants claimed they were very mature and used common words about "growing up too fast" to describe the development of their maturity. Chloe argued that although this has some benefits, such as an increased sense of independence and competence when it comes to looking after herself, it came at a significant emotional price. Chloe described herself as "21 going on 30" and admitted "I gained a lot more life experience, but it was pretty chaotic. I definitely would not want to do that again."

Independence/ self-sufficiency.

While the circumstances of surviving many difficult emotional events growing up undoubtedly contributed to the development of independence and the ability to be self-sufficient in these four young women, Grace and Mariah both identified themselves as having an innate predisposition toward an independent character. Grace reported that she had a somewhat difficult temperament as a child; her mother had a book entitled "The Strong-Willed Child" and used this to refer to Grace in a negative way regularly. Grace described that as an infant she refused to conform to a schedule, and as a toddler she was dressing herself in mismatched outfits of her own choosing, refusing to let her mother pick her clothes: "I had my own mind and I wasn't afraid to use it." Grace believes that this personality trait was instrumental to her survival because it meant that she was able to get by without depending on others, particularly when important "others" turned out to be unreliable.

On the other hand, Amy and Chloe both argued that it was mainly their circumstances that forced them to become self-sufficient. For example, Amy reported that she was looking forward to being an adult, but found it difficult initially to be totally responsible for her self. Amy said:

> I always have to be self-sufficient and I need to make sure that I have that money to pay my bills because if I don't, there's nowhere to go… I don't have parents to call to get my rent paid this month. If I don't do it myself then nobody's going to do it.

Chloe sees her independence as a positive outcome of a turbulent childhood and not having anyone she can fall back on. Like Grace and Amy, Chloe believes that self-sufficiency and survival are closely linked. Chloe discussed the need to build her "own security net" in terms of financial savings because she can't rely on family to bail her out if she can't make ends meet. She stated: "It's either I have it, or I'm on the street. So I kind of get a little feisty, you have to fight for what you've got."

Conditional optimism.

All of these young women revealed extremely positive views for their future. Amy said: "Oh, gosh, I'm so optimistic. I have not a clue where it's going but I'm so excited to see where it goes!" Mariah recounted the personal characteristics she believed would allow her to continue to succeed:

> I really can't see myself failing. My whole life story is all about succeeding, being totally opposite of what it's supposed to be… I'm just a positive thinker and I just don't think it's possible for- like I would never let like, when my sister, living on the streets and stuff and I just don't understand how because I would NEVER... I would never let myself have that low of a life standard. I'm worth so much more than that. I would always do what it takes to be where I want to be, I *will* do what it takes.

In this excerpt several key ideas are illustrated. Mariah believes that she is worthy of a bright future, and her stubbornness combined with a belief in herself will allow her to achieve her goals. This is related to the "I'll show you" attitude and a fierce determination to succeed. Chloe iterated similar sentiments: "I don't see a way I could fail. If I let myself, I will. But I'm not going to, so... I'm a bit stubborn... I'm a Capricorn... goat."

Chloe, Mariah, Amy, and Grace all discussed a lengthy list of personal goals ranging from travelling the world to becoming (literally) a "superstar." This is best summed up by Chloe's statement: "Just all of it, I want to do it all!" and Mariah's statement: "Now I see that anything's possible. I can do whatever I want." At this point in their lives, these young women seem to have a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of general well-being, and positive expectations for what the future holds. Grace commented that being close to completing her degree was helping her to feel much more secure about her future. She stated that when she thinks about her future, she feels "awesome."

On the other hand, these alumni expressed an undercurrent of trepidation stemming from the impending removal of financial support (and related Social Services support) when they completed school. Mariah and Grace both referred to it as "being cut off," and this issue resurfaced in each of the four interviews. Mariah described her worries: "I feel like... I'm a REAL adult, like my parents have died and I'm TOTALLY on my own kinda thing. So I'm scared of that. Really... scared of that." Despite the development of self-sufficiency to combat these feelings, Mariah, Grace, and Amy – all nearing the end of their academic programs – reported considerable anxiety about their finances. Grace and Chloe both described being driven to work themselves to exhaustion to be sure they would have enough money to get by:

> I have a working issue! I work way too much and I run myself sick, but it's that compulsion because it's like if something happens, I need to know I have money on the back burner or I need to know that I'm ok. (Grace)

Despite this anxiety and need to ensure that their basic needs would continue to be met, all participants spoke of their futures as though they were confident that they would be able to handle any new challenges that may arise. Having survived so much already, they have developed a strong sense of self-efficacy. They have combined a determination to succeed, inner sense of deserving success, and an optimistic outlook.

Participants unanimously identified personality characteristics as contributing factors to the resilient outcomes in their lives. These included an “I’ll show you” attitude or a desire to prove to critics in their lives that they could be successful; a strong will; maturity, self-sufficiency, and independence; and an optimistic outlook for the future.

Choosing One's Entourage: Making up for Negative Interpersonal Influences

As a result of the instability that characterized their lives, the participants in this study were exposed to a large number of different interpersonal influences, many of which were described as being negative. Like all children, they had little control over their surroundings, and consequently were unable to choose to exclude these harmful influences. For example, participants reported that many of the social workers they encountered seemed cynical and conveyed the message that they did not expect the foster children they served to achieve very highly. Mariah and Grace argued that these negative expectations are transmitted to foster children, many of whom unquestioningly adopt these beliefs about their potential as their own. Grace reported that she was unusual because she countered her social workers when they said things like "you're gonna end up nothing. And you're not gonna graduate.” She argued back “what do you mean, IF? I'm graduating.” She asserted vehemently that social workers and foster parents would be much more helpful to foster children if they communicated a sense of hope for and belief in a successful future for them. Grace reported an understanding that many foster parents expect perfect behaviour in the short term (and quickly reject foster children with extreme behaviours), but do not have very high expectations for long term outcomes. Grace believes that children will do what they can to achieve a higher standard when one is set for them:

> My belief is if you hold the bar up here, kids will reach it. They will jump to reach that bar. If you put it here, they have nothing to reach for, so they stay nothing. They just kinda stay shit. It would be like anybody, if no one expected anything of you, why would you bother?... When you do something that you get pride for, or pride from, or people congratulate you or whatever, it makes you want to do more things to get that attention. It's better than negative attention.

Grace further described asking foster parents why they don't hold the foster children in their home to the same standard as their own children, including expectations for post-secondary achievement. Grace stated that foster parents often believe that foster children are incapable of overcoming their challenging backgrounds. Grace vehemently argued that most foster children are "only as disabled or as traumatized as you let them be." She conceded that some children may require professional treatment to overcome emotional/behavioural issues, but believes that most will thrive if they are treated as normal children and held to reasonably high expectations. Mariah stated that expectations are only part of the problem; that there is also a lack of caring, positive people in their lives:

> You have to have goals and aspirations and you have to envision it and you have to believe in it. These kids, they've been told otherwise and they believe otherwise, and so they go nowhere. They're just a downward spiral. They envision less of themselves and they become less. I just don't think people take enough time with them and the right people too, the people that actually really do care.

Mariah believes herself to be tougher than many other children, that she was lucky to have a naturally "strong backbone." She described being told many negative things as a child, and argued that most children wouldn't be able to handle that. She advocates that children "need to be told more positive things."

Mariah, Amy, and Chloe described some of their foster parents as a source of at least as much, if not more, abuse than what they had experienced in their birth families. Mariah argued that even when foster parents aren't abusive, they "seem like they're just there to do their job, get paid and take care of the kids." Mariah reported a belief that many foster children have "trust issues" because they've been moved so often, and that this results in foster children being unable to trust their foster parents, to confide in them, or to develop close, healthy emotional attachment relationships. In turn, Mariah argued, foster parents don't hold very high expectations of foster children, and as a result a vicious cycle is perpetuated in which the foster children have little chance to escape a mediocre future because they believe this is what they deserve.

Participants described many of the negative interpersonal influences in their lives over which they had no control, including social workers and foster parents. These critics reinforced negative beliefs about the self and pessimistic expectations for their futures. On the other hand, external validation can have a profound impact on the self-concept of an individual. For example, Amy described the effect of being accepted into her post-secondary program:

> [I thought], they probably won't accept me because I'm a loser, and I still kind of had that attitude, that you know, I'm not able to do these types of things. So I applied and I went for my interview and the lady who interviewed me was my mom's home support worker, so I was like okay, they're not going to take me. They KNOW who I am. And three weeks later I got a letter in the mail and it said you've been approved to the [name of program]. And I was like, hnnnh, it was

> probably like the best day of my life seeing that, like, oh my God, they're looking past you know, rebellious, out of control Amy – that I felt I was perceived as. And also believed I was at that point in time.

This excerpt illustrates the power of an endorsement from an external source and alludes to the value of having positive interpersonal influences in one's life. Participants in the current study unanimously referred to exercising control over their interpersonal "entourage" whenever possible. This included making deliberate choices to include positive influences and exclude negative ones with mentors, peer friendships, and birth family members.

Mentorship.

For Amy, having a mentor who believed in her was the other factor that she considered key to her success, in addition to the "I'll show you" attitude. When Amy first met Shelly, she thought her support was too good to be true: "some crazy lady telling me that she'll never give up on me, well, everybody who's been involved in my life to this point has given up on me. Or I've pushed them away or whatever." But Shelly was impossible to push away, despite Amy's attempts to do so. Shelly passed this "test" and has become one of the most important people in Amy's life. Now Amy is able to see the positive effects of having someone who believed in her, particularly when she was not able to believe in herself. Furthermore, Shelly continues to be a role model for Amy, who says "I want to be Shelly." It is noteworthy that having ONE supportive cheerleader could counteract the effects of many negative voices. In Amy's life, she reported having social workers and family members who constantly told her she would not succeed. At the time of the interview, Amy noted that her mother still did not support her in pursuing her educational goals, even a short few months away from her graduation: "Even now, none of my family thinks that I'll be successful." It would seem that Amy has learned, after many years, not to internalize all of these negative voices.

Upon closer examination however, finding supportive adults was something Amy was always skilled at. Although she continued to move and change schools regularly throughout junior high and high school, Amy managed to find one teacher to communicate with:

> I'd be able to find that one teacher at every school that I was able to make that little bit of a connection with. And it was usually the teacher that everybody else hated. I'm not sure what that's about but I always found that connection with that teacher. And so I think just being able to have that little bit of a conversation with them and them kind of knowing a little bit more about me than what a lot of the other teachers knew about me was quite helpful.

Chloe was also able to identify two people who had been positive influences for her. One of them was an older student that she met at a party in junior high school. She looks up to this friend because she has "always been there" and because she is pursuing a career in Child and Youth Care, which Chloe thinks is admirable. Chloe's other mentor was one of her foster mothers, Alex. Alex was a good "mother" role model and also helped Chloe to reframe her turbulent past as something that might be of benefit to her and to others. Chloe described them both as having "strong-willed" personalities, and stated that this was part of the reason they were inspirational to her. Chloe recognized self-sufficiency and determination as extremely valuable traits to model.

In contrast, Grace is able to identify role models for herself now, as an adult, but believes that her independent personality and survival instinct prevented her from being able to benefit from the presence of a mentor in her life growing up:

> I was always very independent because of everything. You have to be, because you know, you might have someone supporting you now, but what if they're gone? You just kind of learn not to put your full trust into somebody. So it wasn't until I was an adult when I knew I could take care of myself that I started looking up to other people… when I was younger I was just a little too vulnerable to even- like I had to just really focus on me, and just being independent, because, you know, you break that stride or something... You're kind of in a survival mode in that sense.

Mariah also did not identify any significant individual adult mentors in her life growing up. She recalled teachers telling her that she'd "come so far" and that she had a lot of potential, but mainly identified her best friend and participation in gymnastics as the primary factors that contributed to her success. She did refer to gymnastics as her "mentor," and though this does not fit with the traditional meaning of the word mentorship as coming from an adult role model, it did serve a similar purpose in her life. Unlike the other participants however, Mariah did not recognize adult mentorship as something that would be of value to her in the present:

> Now I'm 20 years old, I don't need to look to people to help me keep myself in line. And if I ever do find myself in trouble, I know where to go for help. And I have a good relationship with my social worker, but I only talk to her once a month. She always is like "I'm so proud of where you are." I guess everybody at the office knows that I'm the dream... the good kid to work with. Yeah, if I'm ever in dire need of help, I guess I would probably go to her. But I'm kinda just doing my own thing.

Peer friendships.

For Mariah, another critical influence was peer friendships. In her interview, Mariah described at length the need to find the right kind of friends. She noted that many children in foster care "have bad friends." They become friends with antisocial youth and end up engaging in delinquent behaviours in order to be accepted. Mariah cited pre-teens smoking cigarettes and marijuana as examples of offending behaviours. She stated that these peers don't care about morals or about academic success, and consequently are likely to contribute to negative outcomes for foster youth. Furthermore, Mariah saw the families of her friends as a valuable resource for positive role models. She described having friends but changing her mind about them after visiting them at home and meeting their families. Mariah explained that when she learned that one of her friends lived with her mother in a trailer park, she made a conscious decision to end the friendship. She felt that she was perceived by others as coming from poverty, or perhaps that that was where she belonged, and this was a judgment she desperately wanted to escape. In addition, Mariah argued that these friends and their lifestyles were filled with negative energy. Instead, Mariah sought friendship with the "popular" crowd. Becoming friends with them was something she not only wanted, but felt was a necessity. She perceived that they were always happy, positive, and liked by everyone and "that's what I wanted to be."

> That was a very large priority… If I didn't have those friends I don't think I would have been able to be where I am today, but I don't even think it's a possibility that I didn't have those friends. I did everything in my power to make sure I had those friends. I did.

One of these friends, Elizabeth, became her best friend. Mariah described her as a key factor in her success. It was Elizabeth who encouraged her to get out of her abusive adoptive home, and she stayed with Elizabeth and her family for awhile after she left foster care. Mariah believed that Elizabeth's family was "perfect" because they were "solid and had good morals," and Mariah soaked up this influence like a sponge, stating that it was one of the few positive ones in her life. This description fits closely with that of a mentoring relationship. Mariah explained that she'd always had a good sense of right and wrong, but she believes that peer influences helped her to learn from her mistakes and not to feel sorry for herself, but instead to make the most of her situation. Mariah feels that this is characteristic that differentiates her from other youth in care: "I didn't cry; I didn't sulk over my life. A lot of them just... I don't know, they can't see past it."

Chloe also mentioned the importance of peer friendships. She indicated that she had a group of caring friends who supported her when she was "abandoned" by Tina at the age of 15. Chloe likened these friends to a protective family and stated "pretty much all I have is my friends." Furthermore, Chloe explained that her friends were a key factor in encouraging her to pursue post-secondary school and to make the most of her situation by using her personal background as a resource to study psychology. They also help to keep her motivated: "even when I get frustrated here they're like 'ah, quit complaining and just go back to school.' Yeah. That's probably my best inspiration to go back, and to keep going."

Decisions about birth family connections.

Another method that Amy, Chloe, Grace, and Mariah used to actively control the social influences in their lives was to make conscious and deliberate choices about their relationships with their birth families. For Amy, who maintains a relationship with her mother, it is about accepting the relationship the way it is rather than seeking to find something in it that has never been there. In many ways, Amy feels that she has taken on the parent role in the relationship, and explained that she is the one who rescues her mother when her mental health issues act up and/or behaviour gets out of control. She stated that this makes for a very "rocky" and "up and down" relationship; they still do not consistently get along. Nevertheless, Amy is not willing to give up the relationship:

> People always tell me, like, why do you still talk to her? Well, she's my mom. And if she's my mom I should love her, shouldn't I? Right? I guess that's kind of my mind frame and so instead of trying to change who she is I've just accepted the way she is. And have learned to better cope and deal with what's happening with her.

On the other hand, Amy has made a conscious choice not to maintain a relationship with her grandmother since her grandfather passed away. Although she was very close to her grandfather, she has determined that her grandmother is a very pessimistic person who focuses on people's flaws. As a result, Amy decided not to involve her in her life as an adult.

Making decisions to excise negative influences is something that Amy has in common with both Mariah and Grace. Grace has chosen not to have a relationship with her birth mother since the disastrous reunification attempt after she was living with Rose and Bob. She explains: "I just realized she was never going to change and you know, she just kind of uses people for her own benefit and whatever she feels she needs out of them, uses that and then that's it." By this time in her life, Grace also had Rose as a point of comparison, and began to understand that there was at least one significant adult who was willing to stick up for her and put her needs first, and who she could in turn respect.

Mariah also described making some difficult decisions about renouncing all connections with her birth family. When she was a teenager, her half-sister Melissa had begun living on the street and found their uncle and grandmother living nearby. Mariah went to visit them, but did not enjoy the experience. She explained that they lived in a very rough part of the city, and she made a conscious decision that this was not an influence that she wanted in her life. During her adolescence, Mariah also saw her mother for the first time since she was apprehended by social services and described it as "like looking at a stranger." Finally, Mariah decided to end her relationship with her half-sister; the only sibling she was still in contact with, after Melissa physically attacked her. Mariah explained that although Melissa's behaviour was the result of mental health issues and drug addictions, she felt that Melissa's lifestyle would compromise her own safety by association; something she was not willing to do.

Conversely, Grace has relationships with all of her siblings, and spoke of the possibility of going to live with her brother in Sweden to pursue a Master's degree one day. Grace is also in the process of rebuilding her relationship with her father. She stated that he is a "phenomenal dad," but her mother said such negative things about him when Grace was growing up that for a long time she was unable to accept his offers to help out. Because of this, she describes the rebuilding process as a little like getting to know a complete stranger, but she believes that her father will be a positive influence and source of support for her in the future.

Chloe had less of a choice about maintaining relationships with birth family members, as most of them passed away when she was still a child. She did, however, make a conscious choice to stop requesting updates about those still living because it was too emotionally difficult.

Participants agreed that interpersonal relationships were important factors in producing resilient outcomes. On one hand, they described that negative criticism from others contributes to a poor self-concept and feelings of hopelessness for the future, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They agreed that this is a problem that is endemic within the foster care system because many foster parents and social workers maintain low expectations for the foster children under their care. Unfortunately, foster children have virtually no control over these influences. On the other hand, participants concurred that it was important to exert as much control as possible over other interpersonal influences in one's life, although there was a lack of agreement between them about which relationships were most important. In some cases, developing a strong attachment relationship with a supportive adult was a critical factor in reinforcing a positive self-concept and instilling hope for a brighter future. In others, peer friendships helped fulfill a family-like supportive role and raised participants' expectations for their own futures. In all cases, decisions were made about the costs and benefits of including various birth family members in their adult lives, resulting in some participants choosing not to have anything to do with certain family members, and other participants reframing these relationships in a new way.

Finding One's Purpose/Value

The last factor that participants identified as being integral to their success was having a sense of purpose. In her interview, Grace pondered the question of whether resilience was innate or learned, and concluded that having a purpose might be a key factor:

> Nature vs. nurture, I really think it's both. You know? You could have the best upbringing and people with everything they could ever ask for and they're on meth on the streets now and you've got people who come from the shittiest parts of town and they're the spokespersons for vulnerable people. Somebody said you

> have to have a purpose; everyone needs to have a purpose. And if you don't have a purpose, then that's when you end up with trouble. Because when you don't have a purpose, that's when you get addictions and stuff because why not? You have nothing to lose. So, if you have something to lose, then you're more willing to succeed.

This idea is well illustrated by the cases of Mariah and Amy. For Mariah, discovering her talent at gymnastics was a critical turning point in her sense of self-worth. She explained that knowing she was good at something instilled in her a belief that she could make something of her life. Furthermore, Mariah argued that her coaches were a positive influence, and that gymnastics gave her the opportunity to make more prosocial friends. This, in turn, gave her the confidence that she needed to approach the popular kids at school and integrate herself into their group.

For Amy, volunteering was an opportunity to contribute to her community and also to surround herself with "healthy people." Amy explained that everyone and everything in her life was unhealthy and negative for so long that she didn't even understand that these influences were harmful. It was not until she saw a different exemplar that she was able to begin to make healthy choices for herself. Interestingly, this set in motion a positive reinforcement cycle; the positive people in her life saw the constructive changes she was making and commended her for them, encouraging and inspiring her to make even more healthy choices. Volunteering at the YWCA also allowed Amy to realize that her knowledge could be of value to others and to feel a sense of accomplishment: "they were allowing me to have that opportunity to be successful and share what I had to offer to these people and I guess I come in with a different perspective when I'm working with people in shelters, because I KNOW what it's like." More recently, her volunteer commitments with Youth Strategies have given her the chance to help implement changes that affect other youth in care, which has also been a rewarding experience: "I think using my experience as a benefit now has been really positive for me too." The feeling of being able to make a difference has bolstered her confidence and motivation to keep going, particularly when life events combined with the stress of her post-secondary program threatened to become overwhelming.

In addition, Amy has also found the community of people she volunteers with to be a significant source of social support and has learned from these people to be more positive, which she also feels is a self-perpetuating benefit:

> Really the big thing is when I'm positive, positive people are going to come my way. And I'm really noticing that, you know, the negativity isn't coming towards me anymore. Of course things will get stressful but it's not like it used to be. You know, the positive people will come towards me instead of the drugs, the alcohol, the pills, you know.

Participating in extracurricular activities and/or volunteerism was something participants identified as a contributing factor to an increased sense of self-worth and a more positive self-concept. This allowed them to view themselves in a more constructive way, and set in motion an upward spiral of positive reinforcement as they began to attract other positive and healthy influences into their lives and to feel increasingly hopeful about their futures.

Educational Pathways to Post-Secondary

Among the four participants, there was considerable variety in educational outcomes through grade school. Although it seems logical that particular early school experiences might affect the educational trajectory of a student and have some impact on whether or not he/she pursues post-secondary education, the variety among these participants suggests that the picture may be more complex. Although Amy stated that she generally did "okay" at school, she faced the most challenges because of her many interprovincial moves. For example, she reported that she was held back in the third grade because she moved 12 times that year, and as a result was not able to effectively absorb any significant pieces of either the Alberta or Saskatchewan curriculums. In addition, Amy recalled that she was never in one school long enough to be properly assessed, so she did not get remedial help in the areas she struggled with most, like spelling. After the third grade, Amy reported being behind her peers, but that the schools she attended seemed to be operating under a "let's just push her through" policy so that she was not held back again. Perhaps not surprisingly, Amy found her post-secondary program to be very challenging. At the time of the interview, she admitted "I'm barely passing, I don't know how I will get through it, but I will. I'll push myself through it." She mentioned that focusing on why she entered the program and what she wanted to get out of it was helpful. Two months later, she succeeded in completing her diploma.

Grace recalled that she was always good at school, but that her attendance was poor when she lived with her biological mother and this affected her grades. One of the positive effects of living with Rose and Bob was that they reinforced the importance of school and expected Grace to attend school and do all of her homework. This was an expectation that Grace easily met. Amy also remembered her favourite foster mother "forcing" her to go to school, even when she was sick, and helping Amy to focus on successfully completing high school. In this case, limits around school attendance may have been an important factor in helping Grace and Amy succeed academically.

Like Grace, Mariah reported that she never found school to be a struggle: "I could not go to class ever and get sixties somehow. You know? Just ace the tests. I guess I got lucky." Mariah acknowledged that some foster children have a harder time in school, and that this was an obstacle she feels fortunate not to have faced. Mariah also admitted that she often did not put in as much effort as she could have, which resulted in her having to spend a year upgrading her courses before she began her post-secondary program. She described school now as being "so easy… you just have to apply yourself."

Chloe believes that the main reason she never excelled in school as a child was due to debilitating levels of anxiety. Her current academic experience is quite the opposite as she works to complete her high school diploma. She said:

> It was just recently I found out that if I apply myself I'm actually quite an honours student… [with] nothing distracting me, I can actually just focus... before all that crazy happened I was actually pretty good at school.

Expectations for Educational Attainment

Interestingly, both Grace and Mariah stated that continuing their education beyond high school never seemed to be optional. Grace considers herself to be fortunate and somewhat unusual in the foster care population because most of her biological and foster family members have completed at least some post-secondary education. Being raised in this environment contributed to an expectation for her to achieve a post-secondary degree or diploma: "it wasn't even a 'will I or won't I?' It was a 'when and where?' kinda thing." Mariah began planning to pursue post-secondary education in the ninth grade when school staff began talking about career planning for high school. She did not think that having a high school diploma alone was an economically viable option:

> That was just what I had to do. People had to go to post-secondary to do anything in life, well, I didn't know anything else. Like really. Ok, well 'how am I gonna make money and how am I gonna live?' Well, you're gonna go to post-secondary for something.

On the other hand, Amy focused on completing high school for most of her adolescence, feeling that this was a sufficiently challenging goal. She disclosed that when she left her positive foster home at the age of 17, much of her motivation to finish school was lost and she dropped out. Eventually, she found a placement in a semi-supported independent living house that required her to be involved in some sort of program, so she decided to return to school. At this point, she had already registered in the Outreach School five times and as a result had to convince the staff that this time she was committed: "I said no, this time it's different, you've gotta take me back. And really I didn't think that time was different. But I told them it was and – it was different." Amy felt that graduating from high school was a significant success for her, and wasn't serious about pursuing post-secondary education until a chance encounter resulted in her finding out about the Advancing Futures Bursary program. In addition, one of Amy's former social workers asked her, "You're going on to post-secondary aren't you?" Amy interpreted this as a statement of expectation rather than a question, and as a result re-evaluated her expectations for herself. After this, it didn't take Amy long to decide on a program. She knew that she wanted to work in the area of foster care so that other children would have a more positive experience than what she'd been through.

Barriers to Pursuing Post-Secondary

All participants acknowledged the value of the Advancing Futures Bursary (AFB) program in their lives. In all four cases, the AFB was an essential element in the decision to attend post-secondary school. While some other emerging adults may be able to rely on parents to help them pay for educational expenses, or living expenses while they attend school, former foster youth do not have this support. Having the provincially-funded bursary in place allows emerging adults who grew up in care to have similar opportunities to emerging adults whose parents help them out, and in the opinion of Grace and Mariah, fulfills the government's role as their guardian. Students who grew up in foster care are often living at the poverty line and may not expect to have the resources required to be able to pay back student debt. Grace argued:

> You're already starting below the starting line and then you're just dug deeper and deeper and deeper... which is why I think a lot of kids don't go to school. It's just more feasible, and makes more sense to just work. And if there's anything about foster kids they're practical, they're realistic, and they're smart. They're street savvy. I mean, you've got to take care of number one. So it's not a question that they don't want to go to school, it just doesn't make sense for them because no one's there to cover their back.

Grace also noted that even the current AFB amount is insufficient with the rising cost of living and recent skyrocketing rent rates in Alberta. She claimed that she has heard about students who are living in shelters and going to school during the day. She recognizes that she is extremely lucky to be able to move back in with her foster parents, where she is paying room and board but at a lower rate than what it would cost to live on her own. She noted that this is an unusual situation among former foster children. Grace has had others berate her for "getting a free ride," but she sees things differently. She still works full time in addition to going to school and is appreciative of the help that Rose and Bob are offering her, yet she said: "When push comes to shove, they're there for me, I'm their daughter, they will say I'm their daughter and everything, but bottom line is I'm not, and they have no financial responsibility to me." Because of this, Grace works hard not to abuse their generosity.

Mariah argued that in addition to financial barriers, many former foster youth are dealing with other challenges that prevent them from being able to succeed not only academically, but in general. These include disabilities and emotional problems, lower levels of intelligence, and not having opportunities to experience success and feel that they have value the way that she was able to do in gymnastics. Chloe's experience volunteering in a group home taught her that drug and alcohol involvement/addictions are yet another barrier to success faced by many foster youth.

Each participant identified factors that in their perception made it difficult or impossible for many of their peers to pursue post-secondary education, yet each of them overcame a significant number of their own challenges to get where they are today. Some of them struggled with school as children, some did not. Some of them expected or wanted to pursue post-secondary education from a young age, while others came to this realization later in adolescence. Regardless of the trajectory, the successful completion of a post-secondary educational program can be appreciated as a resilient outcome for these foster care alumni.

Summary of Results

Participants identified several important factors that contributed to resilience in their lives. Despite the presence of critical voices in their interpersonal entourage, they had an inner belief that they deserved better, which created some angry feelings about their circumstances and an "I'll show you" attitude that prompted them to prove to others that they could rise above the obstacles they faced. They were able to reframe having to "grow up too fast" as positively contributing to their independence and maturity, and presented with highly optimistic views of their future. They discussed their ability to exercise control over interpersonal influences, from choosing inspiring mentors and supportive peer friendships to making difficult decisions about birth family members that were perceived as negatively affecting their lives. Finally, participants argued that foster children need to have opportunities to experience success and a sense of purpose in order to fan that small flame of belief that they are worthy of further achievements. Together, these factors create an "upward spiral" effect that leads to positive outcomes, including successful pursuit of post-secondary education and securing themselves a more stable future.

Each of these factors that participants identified can also be seen as contributing to the process of positively constructing the self. Healthy interpersonal relationships and experiences of success help children and adolescents who have survived traumatic events to feel that they are worthy of a brighter future. The resulting increase in positive self-concept sets in motion an iterative process of reconstructing the events of one's life in a way that is consistent with this positive view of the self. For each of these foster care alumni, this included particular understandings about her agency in the events of her life and the validity of labels and judgments of others. In general, in the process of reconstructing the self, these young women reframed their experiences as being formative to the creation of a current self that is accepted and revered.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

The participant narratives presented in Chapter IV demonstrated that these four emerging adults who grew up in foster care met the criteria for the widely-accepted definition of resilience. They exhibited remarkable positive current adjustment despite having been through considerable adversity (Barton, 2005). As the preceding results section suggests however, there is no simple answer to the question of what caused them to be resilient while many other youth in care experience poor psychosocial outcomes in adulthood. Nevertheless, important factors were revealed; some of which lend further support to well-established factors from other studies, and others that suggest the existence of relatively novel processes contributing to resilient outcomes for former foster youth.

Factors Affecting Resilience

Construction of the Self

The over-arching theme that emerged as a primary process leading to resilience in this research is the "Construction of the Self." This finding is intimately tied to the method of the inquiry; one of the primary motivations to do qualitative research is to learn how participants make sense of their experiences and to access their world from their point of view (Merriam, 2002a). In doing so, it became evident that participants were making sense of the events from their past in a particular way – occasionally constructing them in a more favourable light so that they remained congruent with their current positive self-concept, or omitting details that might be contradictory. This can be viewed as a resilience process that includes multiple contributing factors. In this study, holding a view of the self as respectable, competent, valuable, and worthy of success appears to be critical to being able to surmount obstacles and achieve goals, such as completing a post-secondary education program. This can also be thought of as a "surge protector" function; the construction of the experience is "shut down" before details that are unacceptable can be remembered or included, or only as many negative details as are tolerable within the limits of the current self-construction are integrated.

This idea adds something unique to the existing scholarship on resilience in at-risk youth and foster care alumni. In the literature reviewed for the background of this study, factors such as mentorship (e.g., Aronowitz, 2005), individual personality traits (e.g., Hines et al., 2005), and critical events (Drapeau et al., 2007) were found to contribute to resilient outcomes in at-risk and foster youth. None of these studies examined how participants' understanding of the meaning of events in their lives was affecting current self-conceptions and well-being/ outcomes. Rutter (2006) hypothesized that the response of individuals to their experiences, including the meaning they give them and how they internalize this meaning as pertaining to their self-concept, is a key aspect of understanding individual differences in outcomes following adversity. Rutter further theorized that attributions about experiences affect individuals' sensitivity to risk factors. In the current study, participants seemed to have a "breaker switch" for the tolerability of negative events. They seemed to take responsibility for, or only related as much of their circumstances as was acceptable to their current, positive self-concept. This lends support to Rutter's hypothesis that positive attributions about the meaning of events contribute to a reduction in sensitivity to risk factors. Attributing negative events to external causes allowed foster care alumni to maintain the belief that they deserved a better future, which inspired them to work to prove to others that they could overcome the risk factors that they faced.

Other links to previous research findings are also possible. For example, the process of self-construction may be related to Vanderpol's (2002) discovery that Holocaust survivors created a "safe intrapsychic space" (p.304) for themselves where they imagined themselves resisting their oppressors and being in control. Participants in the current study also seemed to make use of an intrapsychic space where they could make these positive, self-affirming attributions about events in their life. In this space, they took credit for playing an active role in positive things that happened to them, and attributed negative events as being primarily due to external factors such as poor foster parenting, ineffective social workers, or systemic factors within Social Services. In Drapeau et al.'s (2007) study of adolescents in foster care, the ability to absolve themselves of responsibility for negative events in their lives was found to be a key factor in producing resilient outcomes. This is consistent with the results obtained in this study. In Vanderpol's (2002) study, the intrapsychic space phenomenon is also associated with a deep-seated internal belief for Holocaust survivors that they did not deserve what was happening to them. This belief was also present in the participants in this study. Part of their anger over their life's circumstances originated from an internal belief that they deserved a better fate. This deep-seated belief that one has value and deserves happiness, even if the belief is weak and buried under many layers of hurt, is the seed from which a plant of resilience may grow.

Participants noted that they were motivated to show all the people who said that they would not be able to succeed that they could make something of their lives. The attitude of wanting to prove to others that they could overcome the obstacles in their path was also present in Vanderpol's (2002) Holocaust survivors. Interestingly, despite the fact that participants in the present study admitted to having low self-esteem and self-confidence as adolescents, a small seed of positive self-concept must have been present in order for them to feel incensed when critics anticipated that they wouldn't make it. This kernel of self-worth contributed to the resilience process; a finding that is also not unique to this group of former foster youth. Drapeau et al. (2007) found that resilient adolescents in foster care exhibited a strong sense of themselves as having value.

Individual Facilitating Factors

The background literature to this study suggested that research ought to examine participants within their ecological context in order to obtain a realistically complex understanding of the factors contributing to their resilient outcomes (Barton, 2005; Sameroff, 2006). It was therefore not surprising to find that for these young women, the outcome of successful participation in post-secondary education was the result of a multidimensional process that included factors from each level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Some of the individual factors identified in the literature as contributing to resilient outcomes for at-risk youth were also found to be in place for participants in the current study. Olsson et al. (2003) identified personality factors such as independence, tenacity, strong values, and prosocial attitudes as individual traits that foster resilience in adolescents. Foster care alumni in the current study also consistently exhibited these traits. Interestingly, other characteristics identified by Olsson et al. such as self-esteem and self-efficacy were present in the current group of participants at the time of their interviews, but each of them described that they had poor self-esteem as adolescents. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are perhaps better understood as the outcomes of the individual's response to life events. At the point in their lives at which they were interviewed, participants had already overcome many significant challenges, so it is logical that they would have developed some confidence, a sense of self-efficacy, and a positive self-esteem as a result. Arguably therefore, Olsson et al.'s assertion that these are innate "personal attributes" (p.5) is misguided.

The African-American inner-city youth in Smokowski et al.'s (1999) study identified perseverance and determination, as well as the ability to learn from others' mistakes as factors contributing to positive outcomes. The determination and perseverance of participants in the current study is evident. In addition, some participants described being able to learn from their own mistakes and the mistakes of others as a characteristic that separated them from less successful foster care alumni. Finally, optimism for the future is a common feature of resilient at-risk youth (Drapeau et al, 2007; Smokowski et al., 1999), and results of the current study are consistent with these findings. It is likely that there are several factors contributing to the bright outlooks of participants. First, each participant is at a point in her life where she sees herself as having overcome some considerable obstacles. These young women self-identified as "resilient" and volunteered to participate in the study because they believed this to be true of themselves. Second, some of the optimism they exhibited is normative for their age group. Emerging adults often envision unlimited possibilities for themselves and their future (Arnett, 2006). Nevertheless, this characteristic was a noteworthy finding in both the current study and in previous research.

Interpersonal and External Facilitating Factors

Previous scholarship on resilience in at-risk youth has repeatedly demonstrated a key role for mentorship by "caring, prosocial adults" (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p.212) in the production of positive outcomes. Mentors help by believing in adolescents, supporting them, helping to motivate them, and showing them a wider range of possibilities for their futures (Aronowitz, 2005; Drapeau et al., 2007; Rutter, 2006; Smokowski et al., 1999; Todis et al., 2001). In the current study, there was a lack of agreement between participants about the significance and utility of mentorship from adult role-models in producing resilient outcomes. For some participants, having an adult believe they could be successful promoted the development of this belief within the self, while other participants reported that they were unable to trust an adult enough to build a mentoring relationship while in "survival mode" growing up. Some participants did not have much opportunity to have a long-term mentor but could identify an individual or two who helped them to see their lives in a slightly different (more positive) way. On the other hand, one participant argued that adult mentors were not useful to her in the past or the present, but instead felt that peer relationships were a key factor in her success. This same participant did, however, identify friends' parents as positive role models, suggesting that mentorship may have been present but unrecognized by her as a contributing factor to positive outcomes. Essentially, all participants identified some type of mentorship as being important in their lives during childhood and/or adolescence, but the form that this mentorship took varied. This adds to the existing resilience literature by suggesting that mentorship may be useful in forms other than a long-term one-on-one relationship with a caring adult.

Although satisfactory peer relationships are closely linked to adolescents' general sense of satisfaction with their lives (Pepin & Banyard, 2006), most of the literature reviewed for this study did not identify peers as a positive factor contributing to resilience except occasionally in the academic context (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Olsson et al., 2003). Some participants in the current study concurred with previous findings that peers may in fact be a risk factor for negative outcomes (Smokowski et al., 1999). One participant explained her perception that some foster children seek acceptance from peers by becoming involved in delinquent behaviour, which is consistent with Gardner et al.'s (2008) finding that peers can encourage the development of antisocial behaviour in at-risk youth. On the other hand, some participants in the current study identified peer friendships as an important positive influence and contributing factor to their success. These participants described their friends as fulfilling the role of family in their lives; supporting them through emotional difficulties and encouraging them to do well academically and to pursue a post-secondary education. It should be noted however that participants did not unanimously identify peers as a positive or a significant influence in their lives.

Another finding from the existing literature on resilience in at-risk youth is that opportunities for mastery experiences and participation in extra-curricular activities can have significant beneficial effects (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Todis et al., 2001). Masten and Coatsworth specifically posit that extracurricular involvement increases school engagement and promotes good behaviour in at-risk youth while allowing them to have positive, prosocial interactions with peers and adult coaches or group leaders. Participants in the current study identified increases in feelings of self-worth and a sense of purpose for their lives as a result of their participation in extracurricular sports or volunteer activities. They also described these activities as opportunities to have a more "normal" life, to meet healthy peers and adult role models, and to feel that they were good at something. Results from the current study are also consitent with those of Drapeau et al. (2007), finding that youth in care who experienced significant achievements saw them as turning points toward more resilient outcomes because these accomplishments helped them to know that it was possible for them to succeed. Similarly, Rutter (2006) argued that having a variety of opportunities to experience success is fundamental to the development of internal resistance to negative experiences and more active coping strategies. Achieving goals also has the potential to feed into a "positive spiral" effect whereby youth are increasingly more likely to continue to do well after they have experienced some success. They begin to develop more confidence and a stronger sense of self-efficacy, which further contributes to the resilience process (Schofield & Beek, 2005).

One finding that seems to be unique to the current study was the deliberate decisions foster care alumni made about their social "entourage," including finding the right kind of friends and making choices about the involvement of birth family members in their lives. Exercising maximum control over interpersonal influences is not something that has been previously described in the resilience literature. This finding also alludes to the very active role that foster care alumni can play in their resilience and in the construction of their lives. This finding does fit with Arnett's (2006) assertion that emerging adulthood is a critical period when individuals are making significant choices in their lives as they work to shape their futures in a way that is in line with their goals and dreams.

Comparing Outcomes

Former Foster Youth

Participants in the current study shared many characteristics with foster care alumni in other studies. Each recognized that their birth mothers had faced many challenges – ranging from mental health issues to addictions – that prevented them from parenting effectively and that ultimately led to them being placed in care, which is consistent with other foster care populations (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006).

Similarly to the Courtney et al. study, in this sample neglect was a more common reason for apprehension than abuse. All participants identified abuse in their foster care placements, as well as remarkable instability, which are also common features of a childhood in care (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Hines et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2006). Unlike participants in other studies however, none of the participants in the current study expressed a feeling of being fortunate to have ended up in foster care or that this was a life-saving outcome for them. They did express feelings of shame about being in foster care, and feelings of loss around their biological family, which were predictable based on previous research (Courtney et al., 2001; Hines et al.).

In other outcome studies, periodic homelessness, involvement with the law, employment difficulties, psychological distress, and continued dependence on public assistance were all relatively common challenges for foster care alumni (Courtney et al.; Farruggia et al., 2006; Pecora et al., 2006). Despite the exceptional outcome of being enrolled in, and on the verge of completing their post-secondary education, some of these problems were still evident. None of these participants reported having been involved with criminal activity, and none of them expressed challenges with employment. Some participants mentioned episodes of homelessness, and all participants acknowledged ongoing challenges with anxiety, particularly around finances. Each of them was still relying on government bursaries to support herself at the time of the interview. It would be particularly interesting to find out how they fare once they are no longer receiving the Advancing Futures Bursary. Finally, one last factor that the participants in the current study shared with other resilient foster care alumni was minimal alcohol and drug use (Pecora et al., 2006).

Not surprisingly, there were many factors identified by participants in the current study that were common to the participants in Hines et al.'s (2005) qualitative study of post-secondary students who grew up in foster care: the feeling of having been forced to "grow up quickly"; resulting independence and self-sufficiency; tenacity; and a desire to prove to others that they could be successful. In addition, Hines et al.'s participants commented that anxiety over their financial security and ability to provide the basic necessities of life for themselves was a key factor in inspiring them to pursue post-secondary education.

On the other hand, Hines et al.'s (2005) participants reported having little or no contact with their biological family during their time in care. This was an area where there was considerable variability among participants in the current study, ranging from virtually no contact to constant contact with many birth family members. Hines et al. also described easygoing personalities and remarkable levels of intelligence in their participants – as evidenced by their participation in giftedness educational programs. The participants in the current study did not present as particularly easygoing, but fairly serious and driven, nor were they involved in giftedness education. Furthermore, Hines et al.'s participants had remarkably stable lives during high school and had other people in their lives who expected them to pursue post-secondary education, in addition to internal expectations for themselves. This was the case for a minority of participants in this study. Only one participant had both a relatively stable high school "career" and foster parents and birth family members who expected her to attend post-secondary. The other participants either had unstable high school careers, no one in their lives who expected them to pursue post-secondary, or both.

Emerging Adults

Arnett (2006) identified five features that characterize emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, a self-focus, feeling "in between," and a sense of virtually limitless possibility. For the most part, the participants in the current study illustrated each of these characteristics, although Tanner's (2006) developmental task of "recentering" for these young women was tied more to their independence from Social Services' support than from parents. Instability was common; several participants mentioned frequent residential moves since their emancipation from care and some of them also discussed multiple relationship transitions in correlation with these moves. Most participants mentioned that they had moved in the past year and were looking forward to a time of increased stability in the future. Participants were focused on their own lives; it was clear that they were taking steps to look after themselves and secure more positive and stable futures. They also exhibited a keen optimism and sense of possibility for their futures. It seemed that they intended for their futures to be dramatically different from their pasts. Arnett argues that emerging adulthood may be a critical period for the expression of resilience, and in these young women, this certainly seemed to be the case.

On the other hand, these participants each presented as having a fairly strong sense of identity, and feeling more mature than their peers. They discussed growing up quickly and having to learn to fend for themselves at a younger age. There was discrepancy about feeling "in-between;" some participants reported feeling like an adult and having felt that way for some time, while others argued that they did not feel like adults yet because they were still in school. These results support the literature on emerging adulthood; although there are certain characteristics that are common to this developmental period, there is also considerable individual variability among emerging adults (Arnett, 2006; Tanner, 2006).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of the current study regarding the factors that promoted resiliency in four female foster care alumni have implications for individuals who work with foster children and for government policy. This study found the construction of the self to be a key part of the resilience process. This result implies several recommendations for individuals working with foster youth. First, it is important to realize that it may not be obvious which adolescents in foster care are going to demonstrate resilient outcomes. All four participants in this study described having much lower levels of self-esteem and self-worth as teenagers; some of them also alluded to considerable behavioural acting out. Despite this, they are now on the path to becoming well-adjusted young adults. For social workers, foster parents, and other adults on a foster child's "team," it is critical to be aware that some positive gains may not be seen initially, but this doesn't mean that efforts to encourage and help these young people should cease. In other words, it is extremely important not to "give up" on these adolescents. All of them should be treated as though they have the potential to turn their lives around. Participants stated that it was highly discouraging to hear from people in their lives that they weren't expected to be successful. These four participants were fortunate that they had an internal belief that they deserved better and sufficient anger and confidence to work to prove these critics wrong, but not all foster children have the individual personality characteristics necessary to overcome the negative expectations of important adult figures in their lives. Foster parents, social workers, teachers, counsellors, and mentors need to do what they can to "fan the flame" of self-worth and to encourage youth to envision a positive future for themselves.

In addition, it may be helpful to model or teach foster children and adolescents to make particular types of attributions about the events in their lives. Participants mentioned that mentors helped them reframe their challenging background as a formative influence in creating a strong person of whom they could be proud. Foster children also need to be encouraged not to blame themselves for some of the tragic circumstances of their lives, and not to conclude from these experiences that they are worthless. It may be easiest to promote the growth of a healthy sense of self-worth by encouraging children to get involved in school, in extracurricular activities, in volunteer commitments – anywhere that they can experience success and feel that they have value and purpose. These mastery experiences will ideally also provide foster children with an opportunity to develop positive, prosocial relationships with peers and mentors.

Finally, social workers, foster parents, and mentors can help to highlight successes and choices that foster children have. Foster children (depending on developmental ability level) should be given a voice in the outcome of their foster placements, and assisted to see that they have choices about friends, birth family involvement, giving maximum effort at school, engaging in delinquent behaviour, and improving their life situation. Viktor Frankl (2006) wrote "Everything can be taken from a man but ...the last of the human freedoms - the ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (p.104). Foster children can choose to see themselves as victims, or as agents for positive change. Their support team can help them choose the latter, and set in motion an "upward spiral."

From a broader system perspective, these four participants have argued that if post-secondary education is necessary for securing a stable financial future in adulthood, then the government needs to provide instrumental support for emerging adults well beyond the 16 or 18-year-old deadline for emancipation from the foster care system. In Alberta, the Advancing Futures Bursary is making a significant difference in assisting former foster youth in pursuing further education. However, additional funding would not be misguided. As the "parent/guardian" of youth in care, participants argued that the government has a responsibility to ensure that they have every opportunity to become productive members of society, which is an investment that will hopefully prevent the need for increased services in the future.

Evaluating the Research

In order to evaluate the credibility of the present study, it is worth considering whether the interpretations rest soundly on the data upon which they are based. One of the purposes in presenting participant narratives and fairly extensive quotes in the results section was to allow the reader of this research to become acquainted with the study participants well enough to be convinced that the interpretations were justified. Interestingly, the most remarkable and novel finding of this study was not immediately obvious and only emerged after several loops of understanding on the "hermeneutic circle" (Ellis, 1998, p.27). It is hoped that sufficient data have been presented to allow the reader to determine the credibility of this understanding of the construction of the self, which was made possible by the qualitative nature of the research study.

The fit of findings with both the research question to be answered and the existing literature, as well as the utility of the study are other criteria upon which qualitative research may be evaluated (Ellis, 1998; Merriam, 1998). The findings of the current study fit in with, and yet add to, what we already know about factors that promote resilience in at-risk and foster youth, as described previously in this discussion chapter. The findings also answer the research questions, seeking to understand the experiences of foster care alumni and the factors that they identify as being key elements of their resilience and success. Furthermore, the findings lend themselves to suggestions for changes to policy and practice as outlined above. It is hoped that the new findings in this study about the importance of self-construction and making decisions about one's interpersonal entourage will inspire those who work with foster youth to promote and encourage these traits. Finally, the participants in this study have had an opportunity to be heard. When checking participant narratives with participants, I received a touching email from one participant, who couldn't stop thanking me for summarizing her story "so beautifully." It is hoped that the experience of being heard and being valued in the writing of this research adds another small bit of momentum to the upward spiral of self-worth of these participants.

Limitations of the Research

There are nevertheless a few limitations to this study. First, only four emerging adults who grew up in foster care and were attending post-secondary education were interviewed. Furthermore, they were all women. It would be informative to interview more participants, as there was a great deal of variety among their experiences. It would also be of value to see if there are any gender differences in factors that promote resilience among former foster youth by including some male voices.

Although relying exclusively on in-depth interviews from a single source (the participant) allowed for very interesting interpretation and findings, it would also be interesting to have access to some other sources for triangulation of data. It would be valuable to be able to interview participants' foster parents, social workers, and/or close friends to gain additional perspective on the participants' experiences. Some other studies of foster care alumni have had access to their Child Welfare files, so that they can check details of the participants' foster care histories etc. This may have provided additional insight into the way in which participants were constructing themselves and their lives. On the other hand, participants may have changed their stories if they knew they were going to be verified by third party informants, and the power of the study may have been lost.

Future Directions for Research

Participants in this study were able to demonstrate that they have spent some time reflecting upon their life's circumstances and made sense of them, constructing their meaning to be congruent with their current sense of self. Consequently, the findings of this study, which were based on in-depth interview transcripts, reflect a perspective at a particular moment in time, at a particular place in the journey of the lives of each of these young women. It is expected that they will continue to grow, develop, and change as they navigate the transition from emerging adulthood to early adulthood, and into later phases in their lives. As they do so, their perspective about their past will undoubtedly continue to change and evolve also. Their experiences in foster care may get reframed and re-storied into new versions that make more sense with who they are becoming. The details that they consider to be most salient and the factors that they described as most essential to their success might shift. In the overall scheme of a life trajectory, they are still temporally "close" to the experiences and factors that they identified in the current set of interviews. As more time passes between their present and these experiences and as they gain additional life experiences – such as having a family of their own, their perspective will be altered. It would therefore be interesting to re-interview these same four women in ten years time and to see if the factors that they considered to be significant contributors to their success for the current study remain the same, and if they change, in what way?

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the factors contributing to the resiliency of four female foster care alumni who were pursuing post-secondary studies. It revealed that although there is no magic "cure" for the negative sequelae of parental neglect and/or abuse, there are ways to help foster children overcome this history and become productive members of society in adulthood. In particular, individuals who can be helped to feel that they have value are likely to develop positive constructions of themselves, which will help them to weather the challenges that they face. Individual personality characteristics, mentorship, positive relationships with peers, and opportunities for mastery experiences can all contribute to an at-risk youth's positive self-concept. A belief that the self deserves a bright future plays a role in fuelling the determination to succeed and the desire to prove to others that obstacles can be overcome. All of these factors can contribute to resilient outcomes in emerging adulthood. This includes the successful completion of a post-secondary education, which in turn helps foster care alumni to secure a more stable future for their upcoming adult lives.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

Did you grow up in foster care?

Did you know that children who grew up in foster care are less likely to attend and graduate from post-secondary school?

Are you a U of A student who grew up in foster care? I am looking for people like you who are willing to volunteer to participate in a study examining factors that contribute to academic success in post-secondary students who grew up in foster care.

Your participation in this study would involve the completion of a paper-based demographics questionnaire, followed by an in-depth interview. This is expected to take 1-2 hours of your time. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience.

To participate in this study, you must:

- Have completed at least 2 years of University
- Be in good academic standing in your program
- Have spent a minimum of 12 months in foster care during childhood/adolescence (not necessarily continuous)
- Be between the ages of 18-25

This study has been approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB).

For more information, or if you would like to participate, please contact
Tania Jacobs: tjacobs@ualberta.ca or (780) 633-0623

Foster Care Study
tjacobs@ualberta.ca
or (780) 633-0623

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Appendix B: Letter to Participants (Original on U of A letterhead)

Hello! My name is Tania Jacobs, and I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta in Counselling Psychology. I am conducting a study with my supervisor, Dr. Robin Everall, on factors that allow youth raised in foster care to succeed academically and to pursue post-secondary education.

Previous research has shown that children who grow up in foster care are less likely to attend and graduate from post-secondary school, and are at risk for unemployment, poverty, and mental illness. As a post-secondary student who grew up in foster care, you could be described as "resilient," because you have "overcome the odds." I am looking for volunteers who would be willing to discuss what factors they believe to be helpful and/or responsible for their success.

Your participation would involve an interview with me about your experiences of foster care and what factors you feel are responsible for your success. The interview should take between 1 and 2 hours of your time. You will have the opportunity to review your information and provide feedback so that it accurately reflects your experience. Throughout this process, your anonymity will be protected (i.e. all names will be changed).

Please remember that your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

It is my hope that this research may reveal areas where the current foster care system can be improved, and so your participation may be a way to give back to the community.

If you are interested in participating, you may contact me by telephone at (780)633-0623 or by email at tjacobs@ualberta.ca. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Tania Jacobs

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form (Original on U of A letterhead)

Resilience in Emerging Adulthood:
Academic success of post-secondary students raised in foster care

Principal Researcher: Tania Jacobs (Master's Student)
Supervisor: Dr. Robin Everall

Consent Form

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research project is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information included here, please feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose:

My name is Tania Jacobs, and I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta in Counselling Psychology. As part of the requirements for completing my Master's degree, I am conducting a study with my supervisor, Dr. Robin Everall, on factors that allow youth raised in foster care to succeed academically and to pursue post-secondary education.

As a post-secondary student who grew up in foster care, you could be described as "resilient," because you have "overcome the odds." In the current study, I am interested to learn what factors you believe to be helpful and/or responsible for your success. It is anticipated that this investigation may reveal areas where the current foster care system could be improved to encourage more foster care youth to pursue post-secondary studies and thereby secure a more stable employment and financial future for themselves.

Participation:

Your participation in this study will entail completion of a brief demographic questionnaire, followed by an in-depth interview with me. This is expected to take 1–2 hours of your time. There is a possibility that talking about your experience in the foster care system may bring up painful thoughts and feelings for you. Should the need arise, I will provide you with a list of resources that you can access if you feel distressed by your participation in the interview. On the other hand, it is possible that talking about the factors that contributed to your resilience and success may result in positive feelings about your achievements. Please remember that your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Once I have transcribed our interview, I will give you a copy and invite your feedback on whether you believe it to be an accurate representation of your experience in foster care and in post-secondary education. You may choose to edit, add to, or remove parts of the transcript. Transcripts will be altered to protect your anonymity (i.e. all names will be changed).

Confidentiality:

If you choose to participate, our interview will be digitally recorded for data analysis purposes, but what you say will remain confidential. Audio recordings will be stored on a computer protected by a password, and will be identified only by your participant ID number. A backup copy of the audio recording will be burned to CD, which will also be identified only by ID number and kept in a locked cabinet. Transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a separate, secure location. All data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years. I will be analyzing the transcripts looking primarily for common themes among all participants. The findings from this study will be used for my Master's Thesis, research articles, and conference presentations. In all cases, your identity will be protected and any quotes taken from the transcript of our interview will be assigned a pseudonym. A summary of the main findings will also be available to you once the study is completed.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in this research project and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators or involved institutions for their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so please feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have any further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact Tania Jacobs: (780)633-0623, tjacobs@ualberta.ca, or Dr. Robin Everall: (780) 492-2389, robin.everall@ualberta.ca.

I consent to participate in this study as outlined above:

____
Name of Participant

____________________________ ____________________________
Signature of Participant Date

____
Name of Principal Researcher

____________________________ ____________________________
Signature of Principal Researcher Date

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Appendix D: Demographic Information Form

Participant ID #____

Birthdate (dd/mm/yyyy): _____/_____/_________

Gender:
- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Ethnicity:
- ○ Asian
- ○ Black, African American
- ○ Caucasian
- ○ East Indian
- ○ First Nations, Métis, Inuit
- ○ Hispanic, Latino
- ○ Mixed ethnicity
- ○ Other, please specify ________________

Current relationship status:
- ○ Single
- ○ Committed relationship but not living together
- ○ Married/Common-law
- ○ Divorced/Separated
- ○ Widowed

Year of study:
- ○ 2
- ○ 3
- ○ 4
- ○ 5 or above

Student status:
- ○ Full-time
- ○ Part-time

Faculty & Program: ____

Program start date: _______________________

Expected program completion date: _____________________

Appendix E: Research Consultant Confidentiality Agreement

Project Title: Resilience in Emerging Adulthood: Academic success of post-secondary students raised in foster care

Principle Researcher: Tania Jacobs

Research Supervisor: Dr. Robin Everall

I agree to -

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the researcher, Tania Jacobs, or research supervisor, Dr. Robin Everall.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the researcher, Tania Jacobs, or research supervisor, Dr. Robin Everall , when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with the researcher, Tania Jacobs, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the researcher, Tania Jacobs (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

Research consultant:

(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Researcher:

(Print Name)	(Signature)	

(Date)

Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. Please tell me about your foster care history.
2. What is the nature of your relationship with your birth family?
3. When did you first begin to plan to go on to post-secondary school?
4. What factors do you think helped you to get to post-secondary school?
5. Were there any adults or mentors in your life who you feel made a difference for you? Please tell me about these relationships.
6. What other kinds of support did you receive growing up?
   (E.g., counselling/therapy, social worker support, educational support, community support, recreational programs etc.)
7. Please describe how the transition into adulthood (and emancipation from the foster care system, if applicable) has been for you.
8. Do you currently have a mentor?
9. How do you currently feel about your future? What are some of your goals/ expectations/ concerns?